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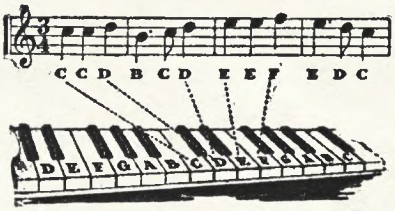

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When rich and conservative Peter Ander suddenly goes berserk, there's plenty of murder, mystery and intrigue in the wind—and nothing can stop Prosecutor Alec Hart from embarking on the baffling and perilous trail of a criminal case that some consider just a bit too hot to touch! 13

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Ace detective Jerry McKay brilliantly solves a weird crime, unearths a clever killer — and springs a strange surprise!

A DEPARTMENT

OFFICIAL BUSINESS ..... *The Editor* 6

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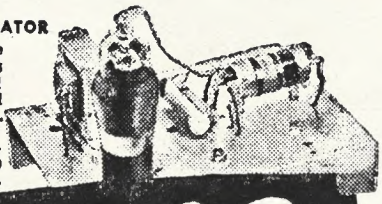

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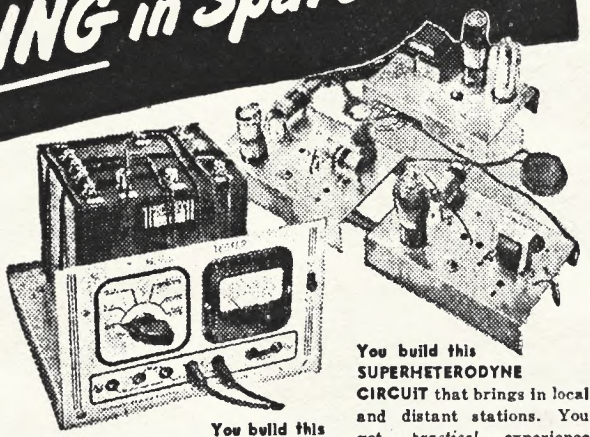

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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

DOUBTLESS you all remember "The Dead Don't Write," by Roger Fuller, which appeared in this magazine—it's not very long ago. Apparently, from your letters, many of you remember Lawrence Hackett, two-fisted private detective, known to his friends as "Moody"—no one knows why.

Well, friends, Moody will be back with us again in a rip-snorter of a novel called DEATH WEARS KID GLOVES. If you missed making Moody Hackett's acquaintance thus far, be sure and get aboard the bandwagon this time. It's strictly on the beam. We're going to give you the barest smattering of the plot—just enough to whet your appetite.

"I think I'm going to be murdered!"

That's what Elliott Pompton, wealthy manufacturer, said to Hackett. Pompton was a queer-looking duck—that is, he dressed queerly for a man of fifty. He was rigged out like a college sophomore—particularly those yellow gloves.

It was a strange tale he told Moody Hackett. He was in business with a partner, Horace Winthrop. The name of the firm was familiar to Hackett. Moreover, Horace was one of The Winthrops—Harvard, Larchmont Yacht Club—Old Colonial and all that stuff. Pompton admitted that he had chiseled his way into the firm, because he had something "on" Winthrop. They had both taken out fifty-thousand-dollar life insurance policies, each to protect the other partner. It was customary.

Beneath the Veneer

Yes, Elliott Pompton had every reason for believing his partner, Horace Winthrop, wanted him out of the way. Winthrop had his eyes either on the governorship or a seat in the Senate. But in spite of all the outward veneer of wealth and society connections, Pompton knew that Winthrop needed money.

But to get back to what Pompton tells Moody Hackett:

One attempt has been made on Pompton's life by an auto trying to run him down. But the second attempt is much more significant. Pompton has his office on the thirty-second floor of the Elgard Building, on the top floor of which is located the Pike's Peak Room Night Club.

Pompton likes to work strange hours. He is often in the office until midnight. The people who go to the night club use the same elevator. Pompton has arranged with the elevator operators, through King, the superintendent, a special signal in the way of a tricky ring. This particular night, Pompton gives the ring. He swears he heard the elevator coming up.

Yawning Death

He goes on to tell Hackett that while in sort of a brown study, busily looking through his briefcase, he goes to step in the elevator—when he discovers, even though the door is open, that there is no elevator there! And thirty-two stories of nothingness yawn emptily before him!

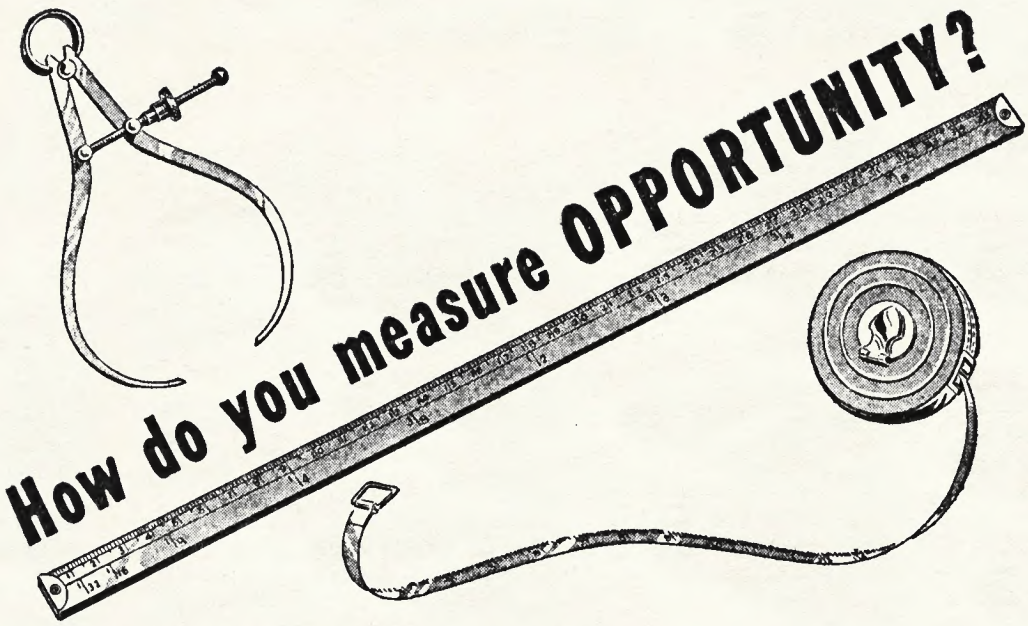
Moody Hackett finds the whole thing very difficult to believe. He does not want to accept the case. Pompton pays him the thousand-dollar-retainer without any question. Pompton also goes on to say that he does not want a bodyguard and that he is not afraid. Hackett thinks the whole thing sounds phony. Moody Hackett will find he hasn't seen anything yet!

Remember Johnny Farrell, the bartender from the other case? Any time Hackett wanted to get the undercover lowdown on anybody Farrell always knew what was what. It was Farrell who sent Pompton to Hackett. So when Moody drifts into the grill where Farrell works, he is surprised to hear the bartender ask:

"Did you see that eighty-six that was looking for you?"

Hackett thinks Farrell means Pompton. Yet Hackett knows that in underworld parlance, an "eighty-six" is a "wrong guy." But

(Continued on page 8)



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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Continued from page 6)

when Hackett questions the bartender anent the matter, Farrell explains that he does not mean Pompton. He means that one-eyed crook known as "Lampy" Davis. Hackett can't imagine why Lampy should be looking for him.

The Wrong Victim!

Later, the detective wanders over to the Elgard Building. There he finds policemen in the lobby and a crowd. There has been an accident—something about the elevator. Among the Homicide men in the foyer, Moody Hackett spots his old friend Fred Marley.

"What happened, Fred?" Hackett asks.

"Not much, Moody," Marley answers. "Somebody stepped into an elevator, only the elevator wasn't there. It's a drop of thirty-some stories. The car was down here, on this floor."

So, Moody Hackett thought, Elliott Pompton was right. Something had happened even after he was so sure he could take care of himself. But the next words the Homicide man said, caused Hackett's brain to spin around in a mad whirl: "A guy by the name of Horace Winthrop—ever hear of him?"

To Moody Hackett this now seemed much more than coincidental. Pompton claimed that Winthrop was trying to have him killed in an elevator shaft. Then it turns out that it is Winthrop who is the victim and not the killer!

One of the most important clues, Hackett finds, is a yellow glove. It is found on the roof of the death car. To his amazement, he learns that the police know who the glove belongs to. It belongs to Lampy Davis.

Hackett now remembers about the "eighty-six" who was looking for him. Lampy Davis is not only a suspect, the police actually have him in custody. In his pocket they find a note, written in a round, feminine hand. The note says:

I'm depending on you to see Winthrop, Lampy, and if he won't do business, you go to Moody Hackett and tell him what you want done.

The note is unsigned. Naturally, Lampy won't tell who it is from for a long time. Why his name should be dragged into it, Hackett hasn't the least idea. Of course, there is the fact that Hackett knew Lampy when he was a kid.

You're going to meet up with some mighty interesting people, friends, including Mrs. Winthrop, who tips the bottle a bit—to "forget," she says. Of course she is Mrs. Winthrop Number Two. There is Cassie Leach, the daughter by Winthrop's first wife—she's still around, and a bit of a hard case.

(Continued on page 10)

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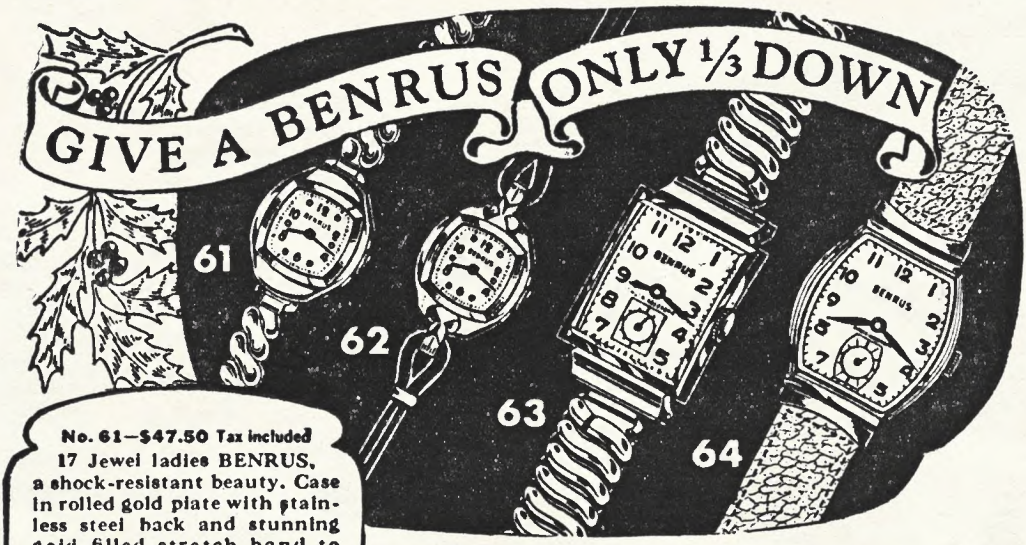

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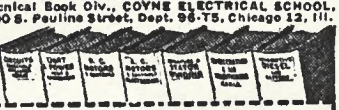

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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Continued from page 8)

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A Fugitive From Justice

In addition, next issue, we bring you a novelet by Wayland Rice, who gave us "The Sign of Murder" in the June issue. You will find his new story, which Mr. Rice calls FLOWERS, MY PRETTY ONE, up to the usual standard set by this brilliant writer.

Larry Grant and his room-mate, John Truett, work in a small country town. Grant notices that the other chap dyes his hair and has raised a mustache. Confronted with certain facts, the room-mate breaks down and admits his name is not Truett, but Hal Thorne. He is running away from his home town of Wayneville because he has been accused of murder.

It seems there was a girl back in Wayneville named Vivian Hall, who was found in the cemetery with her throat slit. Thorne is obliged to admit that he did have a date with her that night and they did quarrel. The evidence against him is certainly damning, but he swears he did not kill her.

Larry Grant convinces Thorne that the best thing for him to do is to go back to Wayneville and give himself up. With much foreboding, Thorne agrees. Grant is sure his room-mate will be cleared.

A few weeks later, Larry Grant is amazed to learn that Thorne has been found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. Grant packs up and goes to Wayneville.

Grant thinks it is very strange, when he arrives in the town, that everybody seems so utterly convinced of Thorne's guilt. There seems to be a veritable "iron curtain" around the case. They not only seem sure Thorne committed the ghastly deed, there are even some , like Gus Granger the hotel clerk, who would like to see him burn for the crime.

There is also Don Eber, the village Romeo —he could have done it out of jealousy. There is the dead girl's uncle "Boozer" who admits he hated her. There is also her father, who has not worked now in quite a while and travels about the country spending money lavishly. It could be insurance money.

Thorne finally worms his way into the

(Concluded on page 99)

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JIM DIVED INTO TROUBLE BUT THEN...
HELP! QUICK! SHE'LL DROWN!
EQUIPPED WITH FACE-MASK AND SPRING DRIVEN HARPOON, SUE DRISCOLL HAD ENJOYED HER FIRST TRY AT FLORIDA "GOGGLE-FISHING" UNTIL HER FRANTIC QUARRY GNARLED THE HARPOON LINE, TRAPPING HER IN DEEP WATER...
HOPE WE DON'T COME UP UNDER MY BOAT
SHE'LL BE OKAY NOW. BUT WE'D BETTER GET HER HOME
THAT'S OUR PLACE ON THE POINT
WHAT HAPPENED, SON?
SIS ALMOST DROWNED, BUT THIS MAN SAVED HER
I APPRECIATE THE INVITATION, SIR, BUT I'VE BEEN ROUGHING IT AND...
AS A GRATEFUL FATHER, I INSIST. LET'S GET YOU FRESHENED UP..
SHAVING'S A CINCH WITH THIS BLADE, SIR! MY FACE FEELS GREAT!
YES, THIN GILLETTES ARE PLENTY KEEN
..AND AFTER FOUR YEARS IN THE ARMY, I'M UNDECIDED ABOUT RETURNING TO WAYBURN U.
WAYBURN! WHY THAT'S MY SCHOOL. I DO HOPE YOU COME BACK
THAT THIN GILLETTE SHAVE TURNED THE TRICK
FOR QUICK EASY SHAVES...GOOD-LOOKING AND REFRESHING...USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. ALSO THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T" AND PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE HARSH, IRRITATING EFFECT OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTE BLADES
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Alec was certain he'd uncover a corpse at any moment (Chap. VIII)

THE GRAVE MUST BE DEEP

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

When rich and conservative Peter Ander goes berserk, there's murder in the wind, and nothing can stop Prosecutor Hart from taking a baffling, peril-laden trail to see which way it blows!

CHAPTER I

A Straight Jacket for Peter

THIRTY-ODD years before, Peter Ander would have been considered the acme of sartorial perfection as he emerged just at noon from his private office on his way to lunch. But on this particular day, his secretary stared at the expression on his face. And she was justified in staring. Ander was as pale as a corpse, and his eyes had a haunted glare.

Peter Ander was a small man, deep in his fifties. He was wearing a derby hat of somber black, a wing collar with a narrow black tie, and gray gloves which he was in the act of pulling on. His coat was tight fitting. So were his trousers. And no one had ever seen him wear anything except brown button shoes.

The buxom, gray-haired, middle-aged Miss

A COMPLETE BOOK LENGTH MYSTERY NOVEL

Lizzie Bohm, the secretary, continued to stare at Ander as he approached her desk in the sumptuously fitted outer office. Never in all the twenty-eight years she had been working for him had she seen her employer look so haggard as this.

Peter Ander stalked up to the secretary's desk and halted beside it.

"Miss Bohm," he said, in low bitter tones, "after I finish lunch, I am going down to Police Headquarters on Centre Street to report a murder. If anything should happen to detain me there, I want you take charge of the office."

Miss Bohm's fascinated eyes widened still further.

"Yes, sir," she answered, too astonished to ask questions. "Yes, Mr. Ander." It was all most extraordinary. "I—I hope you won't be—er—detained."

And then, leaving her still gasping, Peter Ander stalked out of the office.

He was a methodical man. Through all the years he had established an inflexible routine to which he adhered rigidly. Never late, never ill, never absent—his habits were like clockwork. Today was no different from other days.

Peter Ander made his way to the restaurant where he always ate. It was a pleasant place, with great plate glass windows, and he seated himself at a table, in a far corner, which was always reserved for him.

The owner of the restaurant, a pudgy Swede, noticed Ander sit down and gave him the low bow he reserved exclusively for his best and regular customers.

Today Peter Ander ignored Larson, which also was remarkable and another departure from routine.

Nevertheless Ander ordered a lunch calmly enough, ate it slowly, and leaned back to sip his coffee.

Larson continued to watch him. Ander had his gaze fixed on two men at the next table with singular intentness. His coffee cup, raised to within an inch of his lips, was poised there but he made no attempt to drink. The man who had riveted Ander's attention was amusing himself by balancing a glass on the flat side of a table knife.

ANDER let go of the cup. It crashed on the saucer, broke and spilled coffee over his lap. He ignored that. He arose slowly, and his fingers encircled the neck of a heavy water decanter. Grasping this, he pushed back his chair and took three steps to the next table.

The two men glanced up at him in amazement. Ander spoke, in a low, unsteady voice that threatened to break into a strident scream.

"There will be no more murders, do you hear me? No more murders! I won't have it. You compel me to resort to violence."

One of the men started to arise. Ander raised the decanter and brought it down on his head. The man fell across the table, stunned. His companion leaped up and backwards, almost stumbling over his own overturned chair. Ander made no attempt to stop him.

The little man still held the decanter in his fist and he was looking around. His eyes, rolling wildly, were bright pools of fire. Other patrons nearby jumped to their feet and fled. Suddenly Ander raised the decanter. He flung it, with unerring aim, straight at the huge plate glass window. With an explosive crash, the pane broke, scattering glass in every direction.

The restaurant owner, Larson, dashed toward Ander. He reached him just in time. The little man had grasped another decanter and was using it to rain blows at the head of his victim. Water splashed copiously and Ander was yelling. Some of his words were quite indistinguishable, but when he came to the word "murder," it rang out clear and loud.

Larson grasped Ander from behind, pinning his arms tight.

"Get on the phone," Larson yelled to a waiter. "Call the cops and tell them to bring a strait jacket. This man's a maniac."

Within twenty minutes an ambulance had arrived and they tried to get the intricate jacket around Ander. He resisted furiously. It was amazing how much strength he possessed for such a little man.

At last four men got him down and the jacket laced. The ambulance interne sent for the stretcher and they carted Ander out, yelling at the top of his lungs. When the door of the police patrol closed and the green vehicle had slid away from the curb, Larson mopped his face, returned to the dining room.

Glumly the proprietor surveyed the damage. The place was a wreck. Broken glass strewed the floor, tables had been overturned, several chairs had been shattered, patrons had been herded away and the police were now in charge. In the center of the room the ambulance surgeon was applying first aid to the man Ander had attacked. The victim's face was covered with blood and he was still stunned.

The green plush rope had been stretched

across the entrance and the policeman there would not even let Larson go inside, just yet. The proprietor protested in vain.

A hand plucked at Larson's sleeve. It was the waiter who had phoned the police.

"It was Mr. David Firth, one of our best customers," the waiter told Larson. "But he's not seriously injured. His skull wasn't cracked — luckily. It was awful while it lasted, wasn't it? Who would have thought Mr. Ander would do such a thing? Such a meek, mild man, too. To think he'd go crazy, suddenly, like that!"

"They do, occasionally," Larson answered grimly. "You saw! Fortunately the Ander family is rich and they'll pay handsomely to avoid a scandal." His face darkened and an ominous glitter came into his eye. "They had better! The newspapers would just eat this up."

Larson's predictions about the Anders proved to be true. After the battered Mr. Firth had been patched up and sent home to go under the care of his own physician, Mr. Larson did some telephoning. Before he finished he was smiling broadly and the worried look had disappeared from his Nordic face. Miss Bohm, Ander's secretary, received the news with a shocked expression of horror, but Mr. Kipperton Ander, Peter's brother, rose valiantly to the occasion.

Kipperton Ander promised to send a generous check to the restaurant proprietor to pay for the damage and to insure silence, and to attend to any law suit which might arise through Mr. Firth. As Larson hung up, his heart glowed at the open liberality of the Ander clan.

All might have gone well and the Peter Ander affair lost in silence, had it not been for one thing—one unexpected complication.

Someone—an anonymous person—called up the office of the District Attorney of New York County and tipped them off as to what had occurred. Who did it, has never been discovered.

All might have been well, even then, if the informant had talked with District Attorney Crowley himself. Jim Crowley was a crack politician and always knew on which side of the slice of bread to apply the butter. But Jim Crowley happened to be out when the phone call came in. And unfortunately for the Ander family, a young whipper-snapper by the name of Alec Hart, took the message. Hart was one of Crowley's youthful assistants, of no particular family at all, and with no proper respect for wealth and influence or political advantages.

"There will be no more murders, do you hear me?" shouted Ander as he brought the decanter down (Chap. I).

YOUNG Alec Hart pricked up his ears at what he heard and decided to investigate. He went uptown in the department car of a personal friend, Sergeant Erford Nolan, one of the detectives regularly assigned to the District Attorney's office. Nolan's real reason for going along was that Alec had promised him a drink later, and Nolan was thirsty enough to want to collect the bet.

Also neither of the men had liked the idea which had driven Peter Ander off his top.

Murder is a sinister word!

* * * * *

"Pull over just this side of the house, Erf," Alec Hart said. "I don't want them to see the car. If they learn we represent the Police Department, we're sunk."

Sergeant Erford Nolan obeyed. After all, an Assistant District Attorney, even a young one, knows all the ins-and-outs of handling a delicate case such as this one.

"I don't see why we have to be so fussy about their feelings," Nolan complained. "After all, money don't make them any better than us."

"Try that in Tiffany's sometime and find out."

Alec Hart got out of the car. He was a man of athletic build with brown hair and blue eyes. He was carefully dressed, as befitted the youngest member of the District Attorney's staff, in a pencil stripe, a quiet tie and white shirt.

"Bushwah for that!" Sergeant Nolan grunted as he laboriously got himself out from behind the wheel. "Sometimes money don't help. I've pinched several millionaires."

Alec turned to face him, there on the curb along Vine Street.

"Let's get something straight before we go in," he said. "In the first place, Erf, the Ander family is important besides being rich. They have influence. Spell that word in big letters."

Nolan didn't spell the word; he scowled instead, and looked doubtful.

"What makes you think there is anything to the case, anyway?" he asked Alec. "Sure, Peter Ander yelled about murder all the time he was wreckin' that restaurant. But he was crazy, and nobody pays any attention to what a crazy man says."

Alec Hart had paused for a final puff at his cigarette.

"You're right there," he agreed. "That in itself didn't mean much. But when it's coupled with what his family did afterward, it means a devil of a lot. The Ander clan didn't wait a minute. They got busy and silenced the New York newspapers—all of them, and that took influence — plenty of swing, if you ask me. Insanity is a common affliction. Plenty of persons go crazy every day; some even bust furniture, too. There's nothing disgraceful in that. But the Ander family promptly muffled the press. It shows they are scared. About what? It's got me curious, Erf. I want to know why."

Sergeant Nolan snorted.

"You think he knew something about some murder?"

"I'm almost sure of it!" Alec Hart's tone rang with conviction. "Erf, I think Peter Ander saw somebody murdered and it drove him out of his head. And if that's so, we mustn't let the Ander family cover it up."

Alec threw away his cigarette stub and would have moved away had not Nolan put out his hand and detained him.

"Maybe the newspapers didn't think much of the story," he suggested. "Maybe they wouldn't print it."

"Don't tell me that," Alec answered. "Anything concerning the Ander family is news, and when a member of it as important as Peter Ander goes raving mad in a restaurant, that's front page stuff with pictures."

THE Sergeant was convinced.

"Whaddya want me to do?" he asked.

"Don't let on you're a cop," Alec warned him. "Keep it dark unless I tip you off. But keep your eyes open. You're a trained observer. Let me know if you hear or see anything suspicious and tell me about it later."

Nolan frowned. "Aw, I don't like the set-up. If you'd just let me flash my badge, I'd scare the livers out of 'em and have the whole story in no time. I know how to make stubborn birds talk. Try me and see." Nolan said this in his toughest, crustiest police manner.

But Alec Hart just laughed.

"Yes, you would!" he said. "The Anders, eh? They'd have you thrown out of there on your cauliflower ear in two jiffs, then they'd have your stripes off of you, and in twenty-four hours you'd be pounding a beat somewhere — probably way out in South Jamaica. Be sensible, Sergeant, and come on!"

Together the two men approached the Ander home.

The house was one of those old graystone piles with huge windows set into granite and marble casements. Time and the elements had turned the rock to a color not unlike soot, but it was still an imposing place.

CHAPTER II

Bullet in a Chair

HALTING in the front of the house, Alec Hart and Sergeant Nolan surveyed it carefully. From the outside there was no outward indication of evil. The front was four stories high and narrow, flanked on either side by taller buildings, their walls flush with the Ander residence. This residential street in lower Manhattan once had been a fashionable section. It was close to Washington Square. Now the wealthy families had moved further uptown to Madison Avenue. But the Ander clan had clung firmly to the old-fashioned dwelling they had occupied for thirty years.

Alec knew the outward appearance of such places can be deceptive. From the outside they seem small but, once past the iron-grilled door, they can sometimes expand into veritable mansions. The part hidden from the street may be huge indeed.

"Behave now," Alec warned Nolan. "Ready? Here we go—and will Kip Ander resent us!"

Alec pushed the bell button. A mellow chime gong sounded softly inside. Soon the door opened, but it wasn't a servant who had answered. It was a huge man, wearing a paint smeared smock, unpressed trousers, and battered bedroom slippers. His thick mane of black and gray hair was awry. He had no necktie.

"Reporters?" he asked menacingly.

"No," Alec replied. "My name is Hart from the District Attorney's office. My friend is Mr. Nolan, similarly attached. We came to investigate Mr. Peter Ander's misfortune. We won't bother you very long."

"What business is it of the District Attorney?" the big man demanded.

"I'd like to know whom I'm talking to before we go into that, sir," Alec said.

"I'm Kip Ander, Peter's brother. Answer my question."

"Can't we come in?" Alec asked while Sergeant Nolan fumed. Nolan knew how to handle people like this. "I'm making a special concession in your case, Mr. Ander. We are not police officers. We wish to question someone about the constant use of the word murder by your brother in his—well—frankly, his ravings."

"Come in," Kip Ander snapped and stepped to one side.

Passing through a long, narrow, dark reception hall, Kip led them into a library at the far end.

Here was a room! A high cathedral ceiling gave it an air of dignity, the walls were covered with bookshelves, every inch of them filled, and the floors were dotted with expensive furniture and rugs.

Kip Ander seated himself in a chair beside a desk. Nolan sat down on the big overstuffed divan, and Alec dropped into one of the red leather chairs. It was big and comfortable looking.

"Get this over quick," Kip urged. "My daughter came home from school a couple of days ago and I'm painting her. What do you wish to know?"

"I'm wondering what murder it was that drove your brother berserk," Alec said.

Kip laughed. He had the appearance of a strong-willed, domineering, brutal man. Kip's eyes were dark and under his bushy mustache, his lips were a trifle too thick. He would be a difficult man to fight.

"Bosh," scoffed Kip. "Something he read in the paper, no doubt. Probably it preyed on his mind. If that is all, gentlemen, you must excuse me."

"Not quite yet," Alec said firmly and, to his amazement, Kip sank back into his chair. "The doctors at Bellevue have indicated that your brother isn't suffering from delusions. His problem is real. Something did happen to worry Peter Ander so much it caused him to clench his fingers so tightly that the nails cut deep into the palms of his hands. I want to question everyone in this house."

"You will receive no such permission from me," Kip snapped.

Alec leaned forward a trifle. Something was gouging against his back, some hard object in the cushion of the chair.

"Mr. Ander, this matter must be investigated," he said. "I'm giving you concessions no ordinary family could ever get. But if you resent a quiet investigation, I'm afraid the police will conduct an open one."

"Bah!" Kip returned. "I could block you, if I wanted. However, there's nothing to conceal, so I'll send mother down here." He arose from behind the desk. "But you'll have to wait until my daughter and I are at leisure. I can't interrupt her portrait."

WITH this, Kip walked out of the room. In a moment Alec got up, stole to the door and opened it. No one was outside. Alec smiled sheepishly at Nolan, returned to his chair and sat down.

As he leaned back, that protruding object again nudged his shoulder.

Somewhat inquisitively he reached up and discovered there was a slit in the leather, so small it was almost invisible. Before he could investigate it, the door opened and Mrs. Ander came in. She must have been waiting nearby.

Alec and Nolan jumped to their feet. Mrs. Elsie Ander was a small woman, of gracious and dignified appearance and very old.

She was garbed in an old-fashioned black silk dress with a high lace collar which fitted her throat closely. Her shoes were flat-heeled and her hose had come from some treasure hoard of black silk. Despite her great wealth, she wore only one ring, a huge jade affair on the fourth finger of her right hand.

Her face fascinated Alec. It was as smooth as that of a sixteen-year-old girl, contrasting with her hands which were gnarled and brown. Her snow white hair was carefully combed into a knot at the back of her neck.

"Well, gentlemen, what can I do for you?" she asked when she had seated herself.

"Mrs. Ander, I'm sorry about all this," Alec said after he and Nolan had sunk back in their chairs.

"Because Peter is mad and he raves about murder?" she parried. "Yes, I suppose the District Attorney's office is interested. What do you want to know from an old lady who rarely leaves her house?"

"Tell me what made your son crack that way?" Alec answered.

"I'm sorry," she replied. "I haven't the faintest idea. Peter was steady and reliable. He managed my estate."

"And are Kip, his daughter, you, and the servants, the only other people who live here?" Alec asked.

She smiled and her eyes twinkled.

"Indeed not. This is a very big house. There are twenty-one rooms and I maintain quite a household. Alfred Porter, my sister-in-law's son has lived here with me since his parents died. My brother-in-law, Jerome Ander, recently arrived to stay with us. I have a grandson whose parents are dead. His name is Noble Sanborn. I educated him and he resides with me. There is Suzanne, the housekeeper and a very essential part of my houshold. Then, Dr. Prentice—Bob Prentice—lives here also. He is no relation, but I like to keep a medical man about."

"He doesn't practise? Just takes care of you?"

"Doctor Bob is a specialist in keeping elderly people alive. But he also has an excellent practise outside. He just lives here."

"I see." That hard object in the back of the chair was continuing to annoy Alec. "Your household, then, also includes your granddaughter who, I understand, is Kip's child and one of his models. Kip is an artist?"

"A good one," she affirmed. "A strange one too. Kip paints beautiful pictures and then throws them away. He refuses either to sell them or have any hung in exhibitions."

"I must talk with all of those people," Alec suggested.

"Why? They know nothing of any murder. Young man, my son Peter has lost his reason. He will get better sometime. Peter had been working too hard handling my estate. That's all there is to it."

"Then why should he keep talking about murder?" Alec asked.

"Must I account for the ravings of a demented man?" Mrs. Ander retorted, rather tartly.

Under her steady gaze, Alec grew uneasy. Those mild eyes gave him the impression that she was concealing something.

"Possibly all that you say is true, Mrs. Ander," Alec said smoothly. "Yet, as Assistant District Attorney I must continue my investigations until I, also, am satisfied. It's just office routine, you know. I hope you people will cooperate."

"Very well." For the first time during the interview she began to look old. An intense weariness seemed to have overcome her. She arose and Alec hurried to help her. She refused his arm.

"I'll send someone down. I don't know who is at home. Probably only Kip and Judith, my granddaughter. If you wish to see the others, you must come back another time."

"Thank you." Alec opened the door for her. "We'll wait."

SHE nodded and hobbled slowly down the corridor. Alec closed the door and went back to his chair. Nolan was grumbling again.

"There's only one way to handle people like these," Alec said. "We have to go easy."

Nolan didn't agree with that and they argued about it for at least five minutes.

"We're wastin' time," the Sergeant kept saying.

While they were still debating the matter, the door into the hall opened and a girl stood on the threshold, looking at them.

Judith Ander was a strange girl. She was pale and lovely, with that rare elusiveness

Alec carried Mrs. Ander down the steps. She was no heavier than a large doll (Chap. XII).

which all great paintings of beautiful women show. Alec surmised also she was nervous and afraid.

She wore no makeup and was dressed in a plaid skirt, a turtle-necked sweater, and flat-heeled shoes. But her manner was definitely not that of a modern girl.

Alec half arose, then settled back as she came in and hurriedly sat down. That object beneath the upholstery again gave him a nudge under the shoulder blade.

"I'm Judith Ander," she announced. "Will you please hurry. I'm posing for Father and he gets furious at any interruption."

But at the moment Alec hardly heard what she said. He had turned and was glancing at the back of his chair, and what he saw there caused his eyes to narrow to slits. There was a small ragged tear in the leather back and around the edges of the tear, the leather was heavily stained. Yet when he finally turned around and faced her again, his face was expressionless. His mind was working swiftly, however, and he decided to send her away at once.

"Very well, Miss Ander," he said. "I don't want your father to grow irritated. I'll call again. How about tonight? Will the others be here?"

Without a word, Judith left them.

"Some wren!" Evidently Nolan had been greatly impressed. "Look, we're getting nowhere."

"Lend me your knife," Alec said in excited tones. "Then go into the hall and see to it I'm not disturbed for a couple of minutes. Hurry, man!"

"Does this house make everybody go crazy?" Nolan asked, but obeyed the order.

Three or four minutes later Alec and Nolan let themselves out of the house. They went to the car and got in. There, for the first time Alec unfolded his fist and showed Nolan what he had found, imbedded in the back cushion of the red leather chair in which he had been sitting.

Nolan stared at the small round object in Alec's hand. He ignored the small wad of padding Alec also had obtained.

"Well, I'll be blasted!" he exploded. "That's a spent bullet!"

"Correct, Sherlock," Alec said. "A spent bullet that has passed through the body of a rather unfortunate person, or I miss my guess."

"So why don't we slap everybody in the joint under arrest on suspicion of murder?" Alec demanded.

"Let's not be hasty," Alec said grimly. "We'll get the killer when the time comes!"

CHAPTER III.

Return Visit

SERGEANT NOLAN arrived at Alec Hart's office late that same afternoon, bringing additional information.

"The bullet is a thirty-eight," he told Alec. "It's nicely marked so if we can find the gun from which it was fired, we'll have something. The padding you took from the chair was blood-soaked. It's human blood, too. Alec, somebody was murdered in that chair!"

Alec lighted a cigarette, carefully concealing his elation. This was his first real case and it looked like a lulu. Murder in the Ander home. Wow!

"Murdered is right," Alec said. "The hole in that chair was just about where the heart of a person would be while seated. The bullet made a small tear in the red leather covering and the murderer didn't notice either it or the stain. He evidently believed the bullet was lodged in the body of his victim."

"Of course he did," Nolan cried. "That corpse, Alec, is concealed somewhere. The killer didn't take time to look around much, so I'll bet the body is hidden in a hurry too. Now let's go up there and tear that high-hat house apart. I'll even strip the plaster off the walls to uncover the crime."

Alec shook his head. "No, we can't do that yet, Erf. These people are too important. If we disclose what we know, they'd tie us up with high-paid lawyers until they had time to get rid of the corpse." Alec paused and looked at the Sergeant. "You keep away from 'em. You're too impulsive."

"Oh, so I'm out!" Nolan said bitterly. "Just because I'm too coarse in my methods for a socialite killer!"

"Don't be silly," Alec said. "You can do something else. I want you to go to Bellevue and see how Peter Ander is coming along."

Sergeant Nolan's face brightened. "That's good. He's the key man in this puzzle. If Peter talks, it'll blow the whole thing wide open."

"Find out if his case is hopeless," Alec said. "Call me back as soon as you learn the facts. In the meantime, I'm going to Peter's office and interview the people there. So long."

Nolan reluctantly departed and Alec left soon afterward. He squandered ninety cents on taxi-fare to reach Peter Ander's offices before they closed for the day. He was lucky, for he caught Miss Bohm just as she was putting on her hat, preparatory to leaving.

The fat secretary was more than willing to talk. She took off her hat, sat down and gave him thirty minutes of her time. Alec confined his questions mostly to the habits and peculiarities of Peter Ander and to the characteristics of his relatives who lived with him uptown, in the Greenwich Village home.

Alec was particularly interested when she talked about Judith, Kip's daughter.

"Poor child!" Miss Bohm clucked sympathetically, somewhat after the manner of a plump hen. "She's beautiful, but her father keeps her suppressed. He makes her stay home, won't give her any spending money, and never lets her have any boy friends. He keeps her fenced away like a nun and uses her for an artist's model. He did the same thing with her mother who — luckily — is dead now. Why, when Kip sent Judith away to a girls' finishing school, he gave orders she was to be strictly secluded from everyone. He won't let her use makeup and all of her clothes are unsuitable for her."

"Did Peter Ander tell you all this?" Alec asked the secretary.

"No, but I frequently handled Kip's mail at the time."

Regarding Peter Ander's mental breakdown, Miss Bohm could offer no definite information. Like Mrs. Elsie Ander, Peter's mother, she suggested that it might have been caused by overwork.

One item of information that she volunteered interested Alec greatly. She told of a visitor who had called on Peter Ander several days before his mind had suddenly given way—a short, stout man, with light hair. He was about fifty years old and was shabbily dressed. When Miss Bohm had refused to let him in to see Peter, the man had shouted with anger and made so much noise, Peter had come out to see what the trouble was. They had talked together for at least an hour. After the man had left, Peter had seemed to be worried about something. Miss Bohm knew nothing more about the incident than this. Peter had never mentioned what the man wanted.

"Did you get the man's name?" Alec asked her.

"Yes," the secretary answered. "It was Nick Norris. I never saw him again. He never came back."

"Good." Alec wrote down the name. "I'll remember Norris. He may turn out to be important."

WHEN Alec got back to the District Attorney's suite, high up in the building near the Tombs, he found Sergeant Nolan waiting for him in his little office. Nolan had news of a startling nature.

"I went to Bellevue," he said. "Peter Ander ain't there any more."

"What?" yelled Alec. "You mean he recovered?"

"Nope. A few hours ago, his brother, Kip, came after him in an ambulance and took him away to a private sanitarium."

Alec Hart glared at Nolan for a moment or two and then began to pace excitedly up and down.

"That proves it!" he cried. "The Ander family is scared. We've got a murder case, all right. They did that to keep him from talking. Probably now we'll need a special court order to get at him." He stopped pacing abruptly. "Wait a minute." He searched his memory, and swung to Nolan with his eyes glowing. "Fairhaven! That's it. Don't you remember, Erf? It's been in the papers recently, with pictures. The Anders practically own it, through contributions and donations. It's run by Dr. Clavering, a gaunt faced man with a Vandyke and glasses. The Anders practically own him, too. You bet we'll have a tough time getting at Peter now!"

Sergeant Nolan scowled ferociously at Alec Hart.

"You mean they've sewed us up—so far as Peter's concerned?"

"Just about." Alec nodded glumly. Then he brightened. "But we've got other leads. About Peter—what did the Bellevue doctors say regarding his condition?"

"They said he'll make a partial recovery in a day or so," the Sergeant answered. "Well enough to talk, anyway."

Alec snapped his fingers with vexation.

"Well, that's out, for the time being," he mused. He glanced up at Nolan. "Let's go out and eat now, Erf. Then I'll hustle uptown to call on the Anders. I want to catch them all together, while they're at dinner. Miss Bohm told me they usually dined about eight."

It was a few minutes before that hour when Alec mounted the stoop of the Greenwich Village house and once more pressed the button which started the mellow chimes to tolling.

This time the door was opened by a woman

dressed in dark gray, a sort of uniform, and he recognized her instantly from Lizzie Bohm's description. It was Suzanne Christal, the housekeeper.

Lizzie Bohm had described her as prim and domineering, and she had not exaggerated. Suzanne was neat—too neat. Not a hair was out of place. She had long, powerful looking hands and shrewd eyes.

"Well?" she asked.

"I'm Assistant District Attorney Alec Hart. I'm here to see Mrs. Ander, members of the family—and you, Miss Suzanne."

The housekeeper evidently had received her instructions.

"They are having dinner," she said sharply. "Come back later. Meanwhile, I'll learn if they will see you."

"If I do come back, it will be with a warrant and police officers," Alec remarked. "You won't like it. Neither will Kip Ander."

Alec scored a touchdown with that one, for Suzanne stepped aside and permitted him to enter. After closing the door, she led him into the same library where he had been earlier in the day, the room which contained the fatal red leather chair with its eloquent rip. Alec was careful to ignore it now. He didn't want to tip off his hand this early in the game.

Fully a half hour elapsed before they came, the entire family. Thanks to the talkative Lizzie Bohm, Alec felt as if he knew them all personally. He didn't even need the half-insolent, half-derisive introductions of Kip Ander.

"Mr. Hart," Ander sneered, "thinks that poor Peter killed somebody. Or that we did, and that it drove Peter mad. Quaint idea isn't it? But we'll have to put up with him for a little while, I suppose." He turned ironically to Alec. "Well, Mr. Hart, what do you propose to do now?"

All the time Kip Ander had been speaking, Alec had been acutely conscious of one person in the room. Judith Ander. Although he refrained from looking directly at her he was aware of her glance, her slim, straight figure in the big armchair where she was sitting, and the sleek curves of her trim ankles. He was conscious, too, of her eyes, blue and shaded with long dark lashes. She was the only one in the room whose glance was friendly and it sent a warm tingle up and down his spine.

When Kip had finished talking, Alec leaned forward in his chair and pointed a long forefinger at Kip.

"I'll tell you what I mean to do," he snapped. "I'd like to ask why you had Peter Ander whisked off to a private sanitarium in such a hurry? What was the big idea? Were you afraid that I might go up there and learn something?"

EVERYONE in the room gave an audible gasp. Kip Ander's broad face turned brick red. Not in years had anyone dared to talk to him in such a fashion. If he had been sitting down, undoubtedly he would have sprung to his feet. Now he faced Alec belligerently.

"I'll tell you why!" he roared. "It was the only decent thing to do. Did you expect us to keep him down there in Bellevue in a filthy padded cell?"

Before Alec could answer, Mrs. Elsie Ander intervened. Despite her age, she showed she still exerted considerable influence in the government of this family.

"Kip!" she said, sharply. "Be careful! The young man made a good point there." She turned to Alec and gave him a gentle smile. "Mr. Hart, I assure you we had Peter removed to Fairhaven only because we knew he would receive better attention. We did it upon the advice of our family physician, Dr. Prentice." She glanced at the tall, handsome young doctor who was half seated upon the end of a table near one of the wall bookcases.

"Contrary to your opinions, Mr. Hart, we wish to clear up Peter's mental condition as quickly as possible," Prentice said in suave tones. "He is to receive specialized treatment this evening." He glanced at his wrist watch. "The first treatment will be given about one hour from now."

After hearing him speak, Alec changed his opinion of Prentice. At first he had put him down for a medical dilettante. Now he knew different. Everyone in this household was bright and capable, it seemed. He began to realize he had a fight on his hand if he were to carry this case through to a successful conclusion.

"Would you mind describing the treatment?" Alec suggested.

Dr. Prentice hooked one thumb in his coat pocket and shot a glance at Alec out of his clever eyes.

"Not at all," he said. "In certain mental cases there is used what is called the electric shock treatment. Peter is suffering from severe depression, bordering on dementia praecox. We give him an electric shock which induces convulsions. As these seizures wear away, certain brain cells fall into alignment again, restoring normal behavior to the patient."

Alfred Porter, tall, thin and awkward, had been listening to all this, slouched down in his chair. Now he straightened up. Behind his shell-rimmed spectacles, his eyes were aglow with interest.

"So that's what that funny looking machine is for," he cried. He gazed at old Mrs. Ander. "I was over at Fairhaven this afternoon and I saw the machine. It was an interesting contrivance."

Alec was looking at Porter's fingertips which were stained with acids, and he was remembering what Miss Bohm had said about him. Porter was a chemist of considerable ability, but not an electrician. Alec was surprised at the young man's interest. Later he was to remember that interest.

And later Porter was to regret he'd made that slip of the tongue.

CHAPTER IV

Current of Death

PAYING no attention to the interruption of Alfred Porter, Dr. Prentice had continued his remarks, more after the manner of a professor delivering a lecture before a gathering of surgeons, than a medical man explaining a method of treatment to a group of troubled relatives.

"The patient is strapped to a padded table and covered with a blanket," he explained. "A dose of atropine is injected to prevent nausea and the profuse flow of saliva. Electrodes are adjusted to the temples and an eighty to one hundred-volt current is turned on for o-point-two of a second. If no convulsions result, the charge is advanced five or ten volts. Usually a couple of shocks will bring on the necessary convulsions."

As Alec listened to this somewhat gruesome explanation, he watched the members of the family. Their faces told him nothing.

Dr. Prentice ended up by issuing a general invitation to anyone who wished to witness the operation.

"You're all invited," he said. "Would you like to come along, Alfred?"

Porter grinned at him. "No, I'm too busy. I'd rather stay here."

"I'll go," Kip said. "Some member of the family should be there."

Noble Sanborn, the grandson, turned and walked out of the room. Kip looked around challengingly. Judith went over to sit beside Mrs. Ander and squeezed the hand of the older woman.

"What about you, Jerome?" Kip asked Mrs. Ander's brother-in-law.

Jerome was polishing his nails with a handkerchief.

"No, thanks," he said. "I have no inclination to witness medical tortures. Also I saw Peter this afternoon. He isn't very nice to see."

"To the devil with all of you," Kip raged. "Come on, doctor!"

He ignored Alec Hart. At that moment, Alec heard the front door slam. Someone had left the house and he knew it must have been Noble Sanborn. Everyone else was accounted for.

Kip Ander started to follow Dr. Prentice out of the room, hesitated and turned back. He eyed Alec coldly.

"I've got to go, Hart. There's no necessity for your staying."

"But I intend to." Alec smiled up at him. Kip scowled and left the room and, a few minutes later departed for the hospital with Dr. Prentice. Jerome went upstairs two minutes later, Noble Sanborn was already gone, and Alfred Porter mumbled something

[*Turn page*]

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Advt.)*

about an experiment and also went upstairs.

Mrs. Ander whimsically looked at Alec.

"I'm afraid my people haven't much respect for the law, Mr. Hart," she said. "However, I'm at your service."

"Later, perhaps," Alec said. "Right now I'd like to talk with Miss Judith alone."

"Yes, by all means." Mrs. Ander arose. "I'm afraid I'm too worried about Peter to be of much help to you this evening. No, Judith, remain here. Suzanne will help me."

When the door closed behind her, Judith eyed Alec defiantly.

"You don't like my father, do you?" she asked suddenly.

Alec shrugged. "He's a strange man."

"He's brusque," she answered. "Really though, he is very kind and patient."

Kind? Alec thought. Kip was merely using her for his own selfish ends. He had no more consideration for her as a daughter than if she were one of his paint brushes. His world centered about Kip Ander. Everything else was remote.

Kind! Kip wouldn't permit Judith to live like a normal girl, to dress up, apply a little rouge and lipstick, to go out and have fun. And she called him kind!

Alec's motives were selfish too. He intended to use her ruthlessly, to extract information.

Kip, especially, would try to bar Alec Hart from the house. And so far as District Attorney Jim Crowley, Alec's superior, was concerned, he'd never back Alec up. If Alec were to explain about the bullet, the red leather chair and the bloodstained stuffing, Crowley would yank him off the case and either take the glory or cover the whole thing up. Crowley was a politician. So Alec had to work fast and gather enough evidence so Crowley would think twice before interfering.

JUDITH was the answer to Alec's problems. He must make the most of this opportunity. He smiled again at the girl.

"Your father is an artist and artists are temperamental people," he said. "I don't mind your father's attitude toward me. Shall I tell you the truth, Judith. I will—if you'll keep it to yourself."

She stared at him solemnly.

"No, I won't promise anything."

"Well, it's no great secret," Alec said. "I'm not here as an Assistant District Attorney. It's more personal. I really came back to see you. Do you mind?"

A glint of amusement came into her eyes.

"I don't mind," she said. "You're the one who's taking the risk. My father won't like it."

Alec got up, walked over and sat down beside her on the divan.

"Let's not worry about him," he told her. "Don't you think your father is treating you a little unjustly? Perhaps he's dominating you too much, holding you down. If he let you have clothes and things like other girls, you'd be a knockout."

Dimples appeared in her cheeks. She eyed him mockingly.

"Perhaps I like things the way they are," she suggested. "Why are you so worried about me. You're clever, Mr. Hart, but let's talk about the thing that really brought you here. Do you actually believe Uncle Peter knows something about a murder? Do you put any faith in the ravings of a demented man?"

"Ordinarily, no." Alec surveyed her thoughtfully. "But the circumstances are exceptional. Your Uncle Peter had a good home, wealth and no great worries. For twenty-five years he lived a quiet, sedate, respectable life. Men like that don't go mad unless their sanity is put under an unusual strain."

"Doctor Prentice says they do," Judith retorted. "He's a medical man and should know."

"Prentice may have had personal reasons for maintaining that," Alec answered. "Listen, Judith. You came home from school two days ago. During that time do you know if your uncle had any visitors who bothered him? Were there any phone calls which upset him?"

She seemed to withdraw within herself. Her eyes grew remote.

"Nothing that I know of," she said, in an expressionless tone. "Believe me, Mr. Hart, I have no information which would be of value to you." She rose suddenly to her feet. For some reason, it seemed to Alec, she had grown frightened. "I'm rather tired. If you will excuse me, I think I'll go to my room. Why don't you wait here for father and talk with him when he gets back? Perhaps he can tell you something."

Alec saw there was nothing to be gained by trying to detain her. The girl had closed up like a clam. He stood up.

"I'll do what you suggest—just that," he said. "Good night, Judith."

She did not answer. Turning, she walked across the room and went out. For a moment Alec remained there, staring after her, then sat down, cursing himself for a blunder. She was frightened. What had he said, which

had alarmed her? For more than an hour, Alec sat there, thinking over what he had learned and planning his next moves.

It was exactly ten o'clock when he heard a phone ring somewhere. No one answered it and the phone continued to ring with monotonous insistence.

Finally Alec walked into the hallway, located the instrument in an alcove. He hesitated before picking up the receiver.

"Lemme talk to Alec Hart," said a rough, familiar voice.

"What's on your mind, Sergeant?" Alec asked.

"That you, Alec?" Nolan asked. "Good. I'm on my way to Fairhaven Sanitarium. Peter Ander just died."

"How?" Alec ejaculated. "What happened?"

"I don't know yet," the Sergeant replied. "Give me a chance. At Bellevue, a friend of mine, a doctor, told me they were giving Peter some kind of an electric shock at Fairhaven. While I was there, they phoned him from the sanitarium. Peter Ander died, that's all."

"It's enough!" Alec said tensely. "Listen, Erf! Get over to that sanitarium as fast as you can travel. Seal the room in which the treatment was given. Hold Peter's body for a P.M. Don't take any guff from those doctors. Or from Kip Ander. Find out who was present when Peter died and especially if Peter talked."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," Nolan said.

"Call me back here if you get anything new. And watch it, Erf. These people may try to put over a fast one."

Nolan hung up and Alec sat there staring into space. Peter Ander was dead! Peter, who knew the secret of a murder. Alec was sure of it now.

THOSE electric shock treatments, according to Dr. Prentice were almost bound to work with the particular form of mental confusion which beset Peter. Once recovered, Peter would have talked. Someone was afraid of that and had insured Peter's permanent silence. Every member of this household had heard Dr. Prentice proclaim the usual success of the shock treatment. One of them had taken steps.

Alec got up then and went quietly upstairs. There was an amazing array of rooms, all with doors closed tightly. Light showed beneath two of them. Alec tapped on the nearest one and received no answer.

He turned the knob, found the door unlocked, and stepped in. This was undoubtedly Jerome Ander's room. Alec recognized the seedy smoking jacket, which Jerome had worn, thrown across the back of a chair. By the looks of the room, Jerome had left it in a great hurry.

Alec backed out and closed the door again.

He went to the other room which showed a streak of light. As he approached it, he almost could have sworn he heard music. Fast, complicated jive, but it stopped abruptly when he tapped on the door.

It was Judith who opened the door.

"I was looking for Jerome," Alec said, a trifle lamely. "But he's not in his room. I'm sure he didn't leave the house through the front door. Is there a back way out?"

"Of course," Judith replied. "Through the garage to the next street. Mr. Hart, is something wrong?" She read his expression correctly and her hands went to her face. "Is it bad news—about Uncle Peter?"

"Yes. He's dead. It seems the treatment killed him."

Judith's face went dead white. She didn't say anything. She stepped back and closed the door with a slam. Alec heard a bolt grate. He cursed softly. After all, that had been a devil of a way to break the news.

He walked slowly down the stairs to the first floor.

He was in the hall when the door opened and Kip stormed in. His face was angry, his hair disheveled and he wore no hat. He glared at Alec.

"Peter is dead," Kip said. "Dead, do you hear me? I hope that satisfies you. Now clear out and keep away from this house."

"I'm not going," Alec answered. "I already know Peter is dead."

"A ghoul—that's what you are!" Kip roared. "Peter was my brother and I watched him die. Get out!"

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Ander, but I'm not going."

"I'll have you thrown out. I'll do it myself." Kip advanced menacingly.

Alec didn't budge. "Be reasonable about this, sir. Peter was mad and he had raved about a murder. Now he's dead. It was too pat. Can't you see that in all probability he was murdered?"

Kip stared at Alec.

"Nonsense! I stood not two feet away from the table upon which Peter died. There was no one in the room except myself, two nurses, two doctors and Prentice. Something was wrong with Peter's physical state and he died

instantly. Is that murder?"

"We'll wait and see," Alec declared doggedly. "Don't try to throw me out, Mr. Ander. In the first place, I don't think you could do it. Secondly, I'd come back anyway, with detectives, and immediately place you under arrest. Have you lost sight of the fact that I'm a duly appointed official of the law?"

"You're a pipsqueak and a pest," Kip fumed.

Kip rushed up the stairs. Soon afterward a door closed with a slam that rattled the house. Alec sat down on the lower step facing the entrance. When the others returned, he meant to be there. If Nolan phoned, he planned to reach the instrument first.

He passed the time in smoking cigarettes.

When Sergeant Nolan phoned, Alec answered. Nolan was at Fairhaven.

"It's murder," Nolan reported. "I've taken over the sanitarium and I've sent for a squad. The point is, Alec, that these treatments require only a mild shock, and there's evidence of dirty work. Somebody plugged the machine into the wrong outlet—the one which runs the X-ray machine—and Peter got a jolt strong enough almost to tear his head off. It was easily done. The two outlets are close together."

"Oh-ho!" exclaimed Alec. "Find out which members of the Ander family were present, Erf, and keep what you've discovered to yourself. This is our case and we don't want anyone else horning in. That's all. Keep me advised if anything else develops."

Grimly Alec Hart hung up.

CHAPTER V

Booby Trap for Peter

UPON leaving the alcove, Alec went upstairs to make a round of the rooms to find out what members of the family were absent. He looked in Jerome's room and found it was still empty. Judith likewise was not in her room and he believed she had gone to inform her grandmother of her Uncle Peter's death.

Before backing out, he glanced around at her quarters. They were daintily feminine but as old-fashioned as Peter Ander's suits of clothes. There were pleated skirts on the furniture and plush chairs and a hooked rug. The curtains were too frilly.

Next he looked in to see if Jerome had returned. He hadn't.

As he passed a closed doorway, he heard voices. He stopped long enough to recognize the speakers. One of them was Judith. She was consoling her grandmother. He went upstairs to the third floor, to find out if Suzanne, the housekeeper, was home. She wasn't. All the rooms up there were dark. He came down again.

In the living room, on the ground floor, he found Kip, seated in a chair with his head in his hands. Kip told Alec that Suzanne had returned and that she was downstairs in the basement. Alec questioned the older man about what had happened in the hospital. His story agreed with the information Nolan had given over the telephone. Kip said Dr. Prentice had turned on the current. No one had noticed the plug was in the wrong slot until too late and the damage had been done. Kip's manner was much more subdued now. He seemed to be suffering.

Suzanne came upstairs then and Alec questioned her. She claimed she had been out walking. In her stolid way she seemed to be surprised and grieved to learn of Peter Ander's death.

While Alec was talking with her, Jerome Ander, the old lady's brother-in-law, strolled into the living room. He was now wearing his old smoking jacket and slippers. He was yawning.

"I've been asleep in my room," Jerome said. "What's the matter, Kip? You look terrible! Has anything new happened? How did the treatment go?"

Kip told him about Peter's death and Jerome appeared to be surprised and horrified. But Alec had an idea it was no news to Jerome. He believed Jerome's astonishment was another lie, just like the one Jerome had told about being in his room asleep. However, Alec said nothing.

Suzanne finally asked to be allowed to retire to her room. Since she was the first member of the household to get up in the morning, she claimed she needed her sleep. Alec made no objection. If she knew anything more than she was telling, he saw he would never be able to extract it.

When she had gone, the three men sat in silence in the living room, waiting for the return of Alfred Porter and Noble Sanborn. Alec warned both Kip and Jerome not to interfere while he was questioning Porter and Sanborn.

Porter, the chemist, arrived first. He

blinked at Alec through his thick spectacles but showed no surprise at Peter Ander's death, saying he'd telephoned the sanitarium. He admitted he knew that there had been a "blunder" regarding the current.

"It was no blunder," Alec said quietly. "He was murdered."

"Murdered?" repeated Porter. "How—how do you mean?"

"The machine was plugged into the wrong outlet—deliberately." Alec stared intently at Porter. "You didn't test anything out earlier, just for luck, did you, Alfred?"

Porter turned white.

"No!" he cried. "I didn't touch them when I was there. I swear it! I'm scared of electricity." By an effort he recovered his poise and glared at Alec resentfully. "Are you accusing me of killing him?"

"I'm accusing nobody—yet," Alec said. "All I know is that one of the Ander family fixed up a booby trap for Uncle Peter."

Jerome Ander broke silence.

"That's no way to talk to the boy," he said. "You're forgetting yourself, Hart."

Alec turned on him then.

"Is that so?" he snarled. "Well, for all I know, you're the one who killed him. So you were in your room, a half hour ago, asleep. If you say you were, you're a blasted liar. I know, because I looked to find out."

Jerome turned sallow and goggled at Alec.

"Shut up!" Kip cried. "All of you. Mother is coming. Maybe she hasn't learned Peter is dead. Who's going to break it to her?"

Mrs. Elsie Ander entered the room then, leaning on Judith's arm. A glance told Alec his surmise had been right, that Judith had told her the news, for the face of the old lady was waxen white and she looked every minute of her great age. Jerome and Kip assisted her into an easy chair.

The old lady questioned Kip for several minutes. Evidently she had not heard about the X-ray current; she believed it was the treatment itself which had killed her son.

"I can't understand it," she murmured at last. "His heart was always so strong." She sighed. "I must talk to Doctor Bob when he gets back from Fairhaven." Her glance went around the circle of her family. "Where's Noble?"

ALFRED PORTER sniffed. "Out on the the front porch. He was sitting there when I came in—dead drunk." He glanced at Mrs. Ander. "I left him there. I was hoping you wouldn't learn of it."

The old lady's lips tightened.

"Bring him in," she commanded. "It's another one of his spells." She looked at Kip who rose to his feet. "Let me talk with him now. Drunk or not, he must hear of my son Peter's death."

Kip brought Sanborn into the living room but the news failed to sober him up. He merely gaped at Mrs. Ander in a silly fashion.

"Peter's better off dead!" Noble mumbled. "Death ish pre-pref'r'ble to living in a house like thish one. It's like a tomb—"

"Noble!" Kip said sharply, in tones of rebuke.

But Sanborn was past caring.

"Look at 'em!" he yelled. "Kip, Jerome, Alfred—lotta sthuffed shirts. No wunner Uncle Peter went dotty. I would too, if I'd lived ash long ash he did."

"Shut up!" cried Kip.

Noble Sanborn ignored him. His eyes were on Judith, who was watching him in shocking fascination.

"Theresh Judy!" he shouted. "Shesh a honey. She'd be a pippin' if you'd only let her dresh up and have a hair-do and a li'l paint and powder on her fash—face. She'sh got a shwell shape and if she'd jush fix up a li'l, any fellow'd go for her."

Judith's face had turned scarlet.

"Stop it, Noble!" she snapped.

But Noble Sanborn only laughed wildly.

"But she'sh afraid of thisth blashted family, jus' like Uncle Peter was," he went on recklessly. "Then he got wise to the whole gang of you. He learned about that family skeleton Grandma, Kip and Jerome fear sho much, and it drove him crazy. Poor old re-spekable Peter!"

"Kip!" called out Mrs. Ander, in full strong tones. "Silence him!"

Kip acted promptly. Before Alec could interefere, he swung his fist hard to Noble Sanborn's jaw. The blow hurled Noble against the wall. He sank limply to the parquet floor.

Kip swore softly, rubbed his knuckles, lifted Noble as if he had been a fifteen-pound infant, instead of a full-grown youth weighing at least one hundred and fifty or sixty pounds, and carried him from the room. Alec heard his firm steps as he ascended the stairway to the next floor.

Mrs. Ander glanced at Alec. Once more she had assumed her role of a feeble and helpless old lady.

"Mr. Hart, I'm sorry you had to witness this," she said. "But all of us here understand and pity poor Noble. He sometimes has these spells when he drinks. Please for-

give him."

Alec bowed to her in acknowledgment. But he was thinking busily. He realized that none of them had tried to stop Noble when he was raving about Judith, or abusing Kip and Jerome. It was only when Noble had been on the verge of disclosing vital information regarding Peter Ander's malady, that a blow had struck him senseless to the floor. And Mrs. Ander, stern and dominating, had snapped forth the order, ruthlessly, and without hesitation.

There was silence in the room until Kip returned a few minutes later. But what Noble Sanborn had said had caused Alec to remember something which Miss Bohm had mentioned when he'd interviewed her at Peter's office. He decided it was nearly the proper time to spring it.

Kip advanced toward the old lady.

"It's past your bed-time, Mother," he said. "I'll help you upstairs." He glanced at Alec. "You'll excuse her, I'm sure."

Alec rose to his feet as the old lady got up.

"Certainly," he said. He waited until they were almost to the door before he exploded his bombshell.

"One moment," he said. "Did you ever hear of a man named Nick Norris?"

There was a stricken interval of silence in the room. Then by an effort, Mrs. Ander recovered.

"I'm sorry," she faltered. "I never heard of him."

Quietly she and Kip left the room. Soon afterward, Jerome and Porter murmured their excuses and left, too. Alec turned to Judith.

"Did you ever hear of Norris?" he asked her.

"No," she said. She gazed at him curiously. "You asked Grandma the same question, and you heard her answer. What makes you believe we are concealing something, Mr. Hart? You haven't found any corpse? You haven't any evidence of a murder? What makes you persist in this?"

Alec crossed the room and sat down near her.

"Plenty of reasons," he said. "Your Uncle Peter was murdered tonight. Because of what he knew. Are you forgetting that?"

Her eyes flashed. She sprang to her feet.

"You're wrong!" she cried. "I'm positive you are wrong. Oh, it's evil! How can you think such dreadful things of us?"

WITH this she headed for the doorway, indignantly. Alec sprang up instantly and followed. He caught up with her at the doorway.

"I'm sorry." He caught her hand. "Aren't you going to tell me good night?"

He squeezed her hand and he was sure, for an instant, she returned the pressure.

"Good night," she said. "You could be nice if you'd only try." Then she freed her hand and left him standing there.

When he left the house, a few minutes later, he was conscious that Judith Ander was one of the loveliest girls he had ever seen.

* * * * *

Upstairs in their rooms, after Alec Hart had said good night to Judith, the inmates of the household were engaged in certain activities which would greatly have interested the young Assistant District Attorney, had he known about them.

In his laboratory on the third floor, Alfred Porter had been pacing the floor. He finally paused in front of the bench with its glass retorts and its cabinets above, filled with a multitude of chemicals.

"It was bound to come," he muttered. "How could we hope to prevent it? Only Kip is strong enough to face this." His gaze settled upon a small brown bottle. "Arsenic. Tasteless, easy to administer, but too slow. Sodium cyanide would be better, and hydrocyanic acid, better yet. Strychnine, brucine, atropine—which? I wonder which one to use."

* * * * *

In his own locked room, Jerome Ander had dragged forth a heavy leather traveling bag. Inside were books which he took out and then from the bottom of the bag, he produced a cloth-wrapped object. He unwrapped the object and there in his hand lay a glistening object, a blued-steel automatic, sinister and deadly. For a moment he stood holding the weapon, staring at it, then dropped it in his pocket.

Switching off the lights, he left the room and stole down the darkened hallways to the garage. Here he let himself out of the back court which led to the shadowy street.

* * * * *

In his dimly lighted studio on the third floor Kipperton Ander remained only a few minutes, cutting something out of a frame. Then he made his way cautiously down to the cellar, and halted before the massive, oil fired furnace. He opened the door and, after some delay, managed to whip a powerful flame into life. When the fire was hot enough, he fed the bundle he carried into its ruby heart. It required time, for such things are difficult to burn as the past is difficult to

forget. But at last it was done—this sickening, humiliating job! He straightened up with the sweat thick on his forehead.

* * * * *

In her large front room, after she had turned the key in the lock, old Mrs. Ander opened another door—that of a small cabinet—and stood for a moment surveying the contents. On the shelves before her were arrayed a collection of bottles filled with whiskies, cognacs and brandies of various types and descriptions. Many of the bottles were empty, now—too many. Reaching forth, she poured amber liquid into a small glass and tossed it down with a practised hand in two healthy gulps. She continued to pour and to drink.

* * * * *

In her room, upstairs, where Judith had gone after her tender leave-taking of Alec Hart, she likewise was strangely employed.

Behind bolted door she stood before a wardobe full of expensive gowns, all of the latest mode and secretly purchased from famed couturières of both here and abroad. In many boxes reposed smart hats, creations of smart designers. On the dozens of hangers dangled fur coats, capes and wraps of every description. On shoe trees stood dainty slippers, while in flat boxes, cellophane covered, lay dozens of pairs of filmy stockings to match.

From a hanger Judith selected a long flowing evening gown of light blue with sequin-studded belt. Out of the closet she also took a portable record player, plugged it into a wall socket and tuned the costly radio to pick up the record. It was a hot record—wind instruments wailed out an accompaniment to the brasses.

From a locked drawer Judith then took makeup materials, and remedied the paleness of her cheeks and lips with rouge and lipstick. Undoing her hair, she altered it into the latest style with deft fingers, comb and brush.

At last completely transformed into a creature of bewitching beauty, she began to glide around the room, using the latest step. She was gloriously happy. In her imagination she was at a smart cabaret which she knew well, dancing with Alec!

* * * * *

In his room, not far away, Noble Sanborn was lying across the bed where Kip Ander had dropped him, snoring loudly. The left side of his jaw was already swollen and turning blue.

CHAPTER VI

Political Pull

ON THE porch of the Ander home, after leaving Judith, Alec Hart paused for a moment to light a cigarette. Then he glanced up quickly, as a careening car came whirling around the corner. With a screech of protesting tires, it drew up in front of the house. The door banged open, out jumped Sergeant Nolan who slammed the door angrily and hastened across the sidewalk.

"Alec!" cried Nolan. "I'm glad I caught you. There's the devil to pay!"

"You could have phoned," Alec reminded him crisply. "I told you to phone. Remember?"

"Yeah, but that was no good under the circumstances," growled Nolan. "I had to see you personally. Jim Crowley just showed up at Fairhaven. He bawled the daylights out of

[*Turn page*]

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me and wanted to know why the devil we're pestering respectable people like the Anders. He says it's an outrage." Nolan glared indignantly at Alec. "He's going to yank us both off the case."

For a moment Alec's heart sank. Then a wave of rage surged through him.

"Off the case, eh?" he repeated. "Crowley just thinks that. You know what's happened, don't you, Erf? Someone got to him. Probably Kip Ander."

"Yeah, I guessed it," Sergeant Nolan snarled. "You warned me what would happen. And it has. Just as things was going so fine, too." He spread out his hands helplessly. "What are we going to do now, Alec?"

"Plenty," retorted Alec, criptically. "Crowley can't do this to us, regardless of political pull. Now what did you discover at Fairhaven?"

Nolan told him. He had closely questioned the doctors and nurses. Dr. Clavering, head of the sanitarium, had been present, as well as Dr. Prentice. Neither physician had noticed that the plug had been shifted to the X-ray socket, with its high voltage current.

"Before Crowley got there, I searched Peter Ander's clothing and found this," Nolan said.

He handed Alec a folded piece of paper. Alec examined the paper by the light of a nearby street lamp. He gave a start.

It was a check for one hundred thousand dollars, made out to Noble Sanborn, and dated two days before. The check was signed by Peter Ander.

"A hundred grand, Alec!" Nolan said. "Ain't that something"

"It might be, if we knew what it meant," Alec said slowly. He was puzzled and thrilled. "Where'd you get this?"

"Out of Peter Ander's wallet, in Fairhaven," Nolan explained. "His possessions were searched at Bellevue, and then again at Fairhaven by the head nurse when he arrived. But she missed a secret compartment in his wallet. When I got to Fairhaven, one of the first things I did was to look over his stuff again. I'm used to such things and I looked good. That's how I happened to find the check."

Alec then told Nolan the results of his investigation. He hadn't discovered much, but it showed some progress.

"You should have seen how they froze up, Erf, when I mentioned Nick Norris' name," Alec concluded. "They denied ever having heard of Norris. But the way they acted showed they are lying. We'll have to dig up whatever we can on Norris." He folded up Noble Sanborn's check and thrust it into his own wallet. "I'm keeping this until Noble explains why Peter meant to pay him such a wad of money all in one gob. Concerning Fairhaven—did you seal up the treatment room as I suggested?"

"I've got two men posted at the door," the sergeant answered. "Nobody can get in or out of there until I give the word. Them cops are still under my orders."

"All right." Alec grasped the sergeant by the arm and urged him down the porch in the direction of the police car.

"Let's go to Fairhaven and have a showdown with Jim Crowley."

"He yanked us both off," Nolan reminded him. "What can we do?"

"Saw wood," Alec snapped grimly. "Let me handle that."

At the curb Alec paused and glanced back toward the Ander home. From one of the chimney's a column of smoke was pouring, black against the moon drenched sky.

"Look," said Alec. "It's plenty hot, yet somebody has lighted a fire. Now why would they start the furnace going in the middle of the night?"

Nolan stared for a moment in surprise. Then he thrust out his rocklike jaw belligerently.

"There was a man killed in that red leather chair, yet we never found the body," he said. "Let's go see."

ALEC seized him by the sleeve. "No. By this time Kip knows we've been called off the case and they'd never let us in without a search warrant. They'd just laugh at us."

"But they're burning the body right now!" Nolan protested. "We ought to bust down the door!"

"Maybe it isn't a body they're burning after all," Alec pointed out. "We've got to be sure before we take such drastic action. The Ander family is too powerful to be pushed around needlessly, Erf. We'll find out about that fire later. In the meantime, let's go on to Fairhaven."

Reluctantly Sergeant Nolan climbed into the coupe and started the motor. Alec seated himself beside him. In a moment or two they were racing across town.

During that journey Alec pondered over the various problems. Above all things he needed a corpse. Without a corpus delicti, he had no case.

Also, who was Nick Norris? What had he said to Peter Ander at Peter's office before Peter had gone crazy? Why had the mention

of Norris' name reduced the entire Ander family to frozen silence? Lizzie Bohm had described him as poorly dressed and his language threatening. Had he been a blackmailer? Nick Norris presented interesting possibilities.

In front of the commodious, trim looking sanitarium, Sergeant Nolan halted the car and they got out. As Alec climbed the stone steps of the hospital, he knew that in some way he must produce proof that Peter had been murdered. He must show beyond doubt that Ander's death was not the result of accident or carelessness.

A booming voice greeted Alec and Nolan as they entered the office of Dr. Clavering.

"So there you are at last!" the voice thundered. "I've been waiting here for an hour. What detained you, Sergeant? Did you get lost? Now, now—what's all this about the Anders? Why are you pestering them? Whoever told you the Anders ever murdered anybody. That's ridiculous! Speak up, man. Speak up!"

This blast issued from a large, fat-faced, bald-headed man who was seated behind Dr. Clavering's desk—at least, a nameplate indicated it was Dr. Clavering's desk. The man was chewing on a thin, black cigar and glaring at Alec out of puffy, reddened eyes. This was Jim Crowley, District Attorney of New York County.

Alec Hart glared right back at him.

"Are you addressing me?" Alec said. "If you are, you can have my resignation any time you want it." He advanced to the desk and put his clenched fist on the top. "Right now!"

Crowley winced. Alec Hart had campaigned for him in the last election and was credited with swinging many of the votes which had put him into office. The time might come when Crowley would need those votes again and Crowley knew it. He moderated his attitude at once.

"Now, now, Alec, don't be like that," he boomed in hearty tones. "No offense was intended, my boy. You've just made a mistake, that's all." He shook his head. "You ought to leave the Anders alone. It's bad stuff, Alec, bad stuff. People like the Anders don't commit murders."

"I didn't say they had," Alec answered quickly. He became aware for the first time that there were other persons in the office beside Crowley. Dr. Prentice, Dr. Clavering and several nurses. They were staring at him curiously. He continued, "I was just investigating the possibility of a crime. What's wrong about that?"

"Nothing," Crowley admitted. "But you have no body, no proof, not a shred to go on—just a wild guess. And it annoys the Anders. I want you to cut it out."

"Why should I?" Alec retorted. "I believe two persons have been killed. I'm sure Peter Ander was murdered."

Dr. Prentice leaped from his chair.

"That's outrageous!" he cried. He turned to the District Attorney. "You see what I mean, Mr. Crowley? That's the way this young idiot has been talking all along. Innuendoes and wild accusations, based on nothing. First he claimed somebody in the Ander family killed somebody else—name and motive unknown—and now it's Peter Ander who's been murdered! Make him drop this."

Here Sergeant Nolan's heavy voice rumbled forth.

"Says you!" the sergeant growled, edging forward. "What about that shock machine which was plugged in on the wrong circuit? It burned the old guy to death just as if he'd been seated in the electric chair up in Sing Sing. This whole joint looks like a Death House, too. Someone shifted those plugs on purpose to keep him from spilling what he knew. That's what I think."

Alec Hart turned to District Attorney Crowley.

"Sergeant Nolan is right," he said. "Peter Ander intended to visit Police Headquarters to report a murder. But before he could get there, his mind snapped." He glanced at Dr. Clavering. "You can't say Peter was a psychopathic case, can you?"

"Bah!" Dr. Prentice exclaimed. "Are you a doctor, by any chance?"

HERE District Attorney Crowley intervened.

"We're getting nowhere," he said. He faced Clavering. "What's your theory, Doctor?" Alec was sure that Crowley had already heard that theory. Clavering answered promptly.

"My opinion is that some employee, engaged in cleaning up the treatment room, switched the plugs." He waved his hands. "It was just an unfortunate accident. Such things happen even in the best run institutions."

Alec eyed the doctor.

"Why was the cleaner monkeying with the plugs?" he asked sarcastically. "Cleaning them?"

"Hush!" boomed Crowley. "Dr. Clavering's explanation satisfies me. And don't bother the Ander family any more, my boy."

His voice grew heartier. He beamed at Alec. "I've got something better for you, something much better. Tomorrow morning, bright and early, I want you to appear in the West Market Court and take over the gambling cases in that district. The mayor has been complaining about gambling up there and the police have made a bunch of arrests. You shall be the spearhead of our campaign."

"What?" yelled Alec. "You're taking me off a murder investigation to prosecute a bunch of petty card sharpers?"

"You don't understand," protested Crowley. "This is big stuff. The newspapers are going after it. You'll be in full charge and you can have Sergeant Nolan to help you. I'm too busy or I'd handle it myself."

"It wouldn't be that the Anders have wealth and influence enough to cover up a murder?" Alec asked pointedly.

Crowley looked blank.

"What murder? Where is the corpse, the weapon, the suspects, the clues? Why do you assume any murder has been committed?"

"What's to keep me from investigating the Anders on my own time, after hours?"

"Nothing." Crowley grinned at Alec triumphantly. "Except the Ander family knows I've taken you off the case and if you go near them, it will be as a private citizen, and not as a representative of the District Attorney's department. They can have you arrested for trespassing." His eyes sparkled. "And Kip Ander will, too. He told me so."

Alec remembered about the check which he had in his wallet.

"I wonder," he said. "We'll see if Kip has the nerve to put me out."

He turned and left the room. Sergeant Nolan followed him out.

"What are we gonna do now, Alec?" the Sergeant asked. "Gamblers! Gosh, what a mess!"

"Hold everything," Alec said. "We aren't licked yet. Now, Erf, take me to the treatment room. I want to get a gander at it before Crowley yanks your two men away from the door."

Sergeant Nolan took Alec down the hall, nodded to two plainclothesmen lounging in chairs against the wall, and unlocked a door further along the corridor. Inside, he switched on the light. Lying on a table was the body of Peter Ander.

Twenty minutes later, after having examined the body, Alec and the Sergeant emerged from the treatment room and paused for a moment near the door. Alec eyed Nolan gloomily and slowly shook his head.

"From the way you talked to Crowley, I thought you really had some evidence that Peter was murdered, Erf," he said. "But now it looks as if it might have been an accident as Clavering says. Those two electric wall outlets are close together."

Nolan nodded. "Looks like we're sunk, don't it, Alec?"

Alec Hart sighed and then grinned.

"Sure. But I've been in tough places before, and we aren't licked yet. Come on, Erf. You're assigned to help me with those gambling cases and we got to be in West Market Court bright and early."

He led the way out of the private hospital to the car, and when they were seated in it again and had started back on their return journey, he outlined his plans to the Sergeant. During his spare time Nolan was to work on the Ander case. He was to cover the hotels and rooming houses, in likely districts, and try to pick up a line on Nick Norris. It would be a dreary, monotonous task, but Norris had friends who would help him unofficially. The sergeant groaned but promised to work hard. Then Alec lapsed into thoughtful silence.

Above all things he needed two things—the body and the gun that committed the crime. There are many ways of disposing of murder weapons but he believed it was still hidden somewhere around the Ander home. He intended to slip in there some time soon, and conduct a quiet search.

As for the body, that was a different matter. It would be harder to get rid of. Yet it could be cut up and burned to ashes—in a furnace, for instance. The thought intrigued Alec. Burning a corpse sometimes didn't entirely destroy all evidence. There were teeth and bones left behind, and sometimes buttons from clothing.

Alec grinned. Yes, he certainly must manage to examine the Ander furnace.

Sergeant Nolan suddenly plucked at Alec's arm to draw his attention.

"But what about Crowley?" the sergeant asked. "Are you going to tell him?"

"Certainly not," Alec replied. "This is just between you and me. I thought you understood that, Erf."

"Now I do," Nolan replied. "But I just wanted to make sure of it."

"Which also means that we can't get caught at this sub rosa work, Erf," Alec Hart pointed out with a sly wink.

"Don't worry about me," the sergeant boasted. "I'm as slick as silk."

CHAPTER VII

Murder Weapon

BY FIVE-THIRTY the following afternoon, Alec had disposed of the last witness in a long list of gambling cases and had cleared out his office. He leaned back in his chair with a sigh that turned into a groan when his telephone rang. It was Nolan.

"Hello, Sergeant," he said. "Yeah, I'm free, now. Come on in."

Alec was never so happy to see anyone as he was to see this big bulky policeman.

"Crowley's out of the Ander case," Nolan announced as he sank into a chair. "A couple of his ace boys made an investigation. They reported that there's nothing to the murder angle and Peter's death was accidental." He stared at Alec. "Maybe they're right at that."

"What about that spent bullet and that blood-soaked stuffing from the chair?" Alec retorted. "Erf, we've got to find the murder gun. It's somewhere up there in the Ander home and the first chance I get I'm going to slip into the house and try to dig it up. Did you get a lead on Nick Norris?"

"Not a thing," said the detective. "Want me to keep on trying?"

"Yes." Alec Hart rose to his feet. "I'm going to Greenwich Village now and see what I can discover. Maybe I'll get a chance to sneak into the Ander house tonight. All the family will be absent attending the services for Peter at the funeral chapel a few blocks away."

Sergeant Nolan's face brightened.

"Want me to go along?" the policeman asked.

"No. Go home and get your sleep. Tomorrow I want you to keep after Nick Norris. If I need you later, I'll phone you at your home."

Nolan departed reluctantly, and then Alec remembered something he had neglected to do. He looked at his watch. Perhaps there was time, perhaps Miss Bohm had not yet left the office. He dialed her number and she answered promptly. He questioned her about the check which Peter Ander had written for Noble Sanborn.

"Wait a minute," she said. "That sounds like something which ought to be listed in his special fund checkbook. I'll look at the stub for that date and see what it's for."

After a time she came back. "Is the color of the check purple, with tiny horizontal lines running across the paper?"

Alec took out the check and examined it. "Yes."

"Then it's from the special fund," she said. "The checkbook isn't here. It's the only thing which is missing from his desk. I can't understand it." Then she laughed in a relieved fashion. "But there! He must have taken it home himself. Sometimes he did that. Yes, it's probably safe enough."

"Do you know any reason why Peter should be paying Noble Sanborn money?" Alec asked her. He was careful to avoid mentioning the size of the check.

Luckily she neglected to ask.

"No," she said. "Noble has always complained because he never has enough money to spend. He's continually rowing about it. But Kip has remained adamant. He says Noble is extravagant and would only spend it on drink."

"What was the special fund for?" Alec asked.

"Oh, matters that didn't exactly come under the heading of estate business. For instance, Mrs. Ander and Peter both hated dogs and he supported a society organized for the purpose of trying to have them barred from the city. A dog bit Peter when he was a boy and he never forgot it. Also, he was too fastidious to care for any kind of a pet. Why, I remember not long ago—"

She would have rambled on, if Alec hadn't cut her short as politely as he could and hung up. He still hadn't found out what the check was for. Well, there would be time enough for him to puzzle that out later. Right now he must get over to the Ander house. Outside the office, he flagged a taxi and set off. There wasn't any time to waste.

The Ander family was probably departing for the funeral home at this very moment. Once the services were finished, they'd all return. If Kip discovered him, it would be just too bad.

But when Alec caught sight of a newsdealer on a corner not far from the Ander home, he changed his plans. He stopped the taxicab and got out.

Upon catching sight of the newsstand Alec had gotten a sudden idea. Peter was a man of rigid routine. This newsdealer was stationed between Peter's home and his office and probably Ander had been in the habit of purchasing a paper from him every morning. Upon that fateful morning what was it that had driven him mad? Had he read a headline? Was it some item he'd seen in

the paper? Perhaps this newsdealer could furnish a clue. It was a slender chance but worth investigating.

ALEC approached the stand and waited until two customers had departed. Then he bought a paper, unfolded it slowly and stood there scanning the funeral notices.

"Too bad about Peter Ander," Alec said casually. "I knew him slightly. Nice fellow."

"The best," the newsdealer said. "I sold him papers for fifteen years. He never missed a morning until the day he went crazy. He passed me up. He walked right by without giving me a tumble. He never did that before."

"Interesting," Alec said. "Look here, I'm connected with the District Attorney's office. This puzzles me. I can't figure out why Peter went mad. Now that morning—the last one—did he meet anyone?"

"No, not him. He didn't have very many friends. In fact I don't think I ever saw him walking with anyone." He paused and stared at Alec for a moment, as if inclined to talk. "Say, I could tip you off to something if you'll promise not to haul me down to court or get me into trouble."

"Sure. I think it can be managed," Alec said. "What do you know?"

The newsdealer looked up and down the street, leaning far over his tiny counter to accomplish this feat. Then he dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Listen," he said. "Last night a guy comes out of the Ander house. Not by the front door, but through that gate which leads from the court behind the house."

"Yes," Alec urged. "What about it?"

"Well, since this trouble about Peter Ander, I've sorta kept my eyes on the house. This man kept his hands in his pockets and acted sorta sneaky, like a bunch of cops was on his tail. I was just closing up and the stand was dark so he didn't notice me. There was nobody on the street either. This guy steps up to the sewer, takes something out of his pocket and drops it in. I heard it splash when it hit the water. Then he walks away."

Alec Hart's mind instantly went to the missing gun. Something told him there would be no need to search the Ander home now.

"Would you know him again, if you saw him?" Alec asked.

"Sure. He's one of the Anders. I've seen him come and go a lot, but I never found out who he was. He's a cheap skate. He never bought a paper from me."

"I've got five dollars here." Alec reached into his pocket. "Shortly, the family will be returning from the funeral services. If you can pick out the man you saw, the fiver is yours."

"You're on, mister. I could use five bucks."

"And I don't want them to see me," Alec said. "So included in your fee is permission for me to hide in your stand and duck behind the counter."

"Righto!" The newsdealer threw open the little door of his booth. "Come on in here. I'll tip you off when I see him."

Alec accepted the invitation. He blessed his luck.

The funeral party returned about two hours after Alec had concealed himself in the booth. Two cars had stopped in front of the Ander home. Alec peered out cautiously. He saw the members of the family getting out and entering the house.

"That's the guy—third one going in," the newsdealer said. "That's him, all right, mister."

"Very foxy," Alec said. But he wasn't paying compliments to the newsstand owner. He was referring to Jerome Ander—the man who had dropped something into the sewer.

When the Anders had disappeared, Alec went to the nearest drug store and called up the Department of Sewers.

"This is Attorney Alec Hart of the District Attorney's staff," he said. "Have you a man who goes into sewers looking for lost things? I mean someone available right now?"

"We can find a man for you. Lost something, Mr. Hart?"

"No, but I think a valuable piece of evidence was dropped into the sewer. It must be accomplished without attracting attention. How soon can the man get here?"

"Right away. You tell him what to do. Where are you, Mr. Hart?"

Alec gave him instructions and soon afterward a sewer department car stopped half a block down the avenue. A man in hip boots got out and walked up to the newsstand where Alec was waiting.

Alec told what he wanted and the man got busy at once.

THIRTY minutes went by while the man worked down in the sewer and all the while Alec was bathed in cold perspiration. If Jerome spotted these activities from the house, everything might be ruined. Alec wanted to be able to spring a surprise on Jerome. It might induce him to talk.

Finally the workman hauled himself up

out of the sewer, kicked off mud and came over to the newsstand. He had something in his hand.

"Got a hunk of old paper around?" he asked.

The curious newsdealer produced one quickly. The sewer man laid upon it a dripping object—a filth encrusted automatic pistol. "There you are."

Alec Hart's pulses leaped. This, indeed, was a triumph! It was the first real bit of evidence he had obtained since the recovery of the bullet. It would go a long way toward justifying the investigation. It proved that District Attorney Crowley had been wrong in ordering him off the case.

After showing his gratitude in a tangible fashion to both the sewer man and the newsdealer, Alec wrapped up the gun, thrust it into his pocket and walked away.

What would Sergeant Nolan say to this? Alec was positive that the marks on the bullet would show it had been fired by this gun. Murder! Crowley had said that influential people such as the Anders never committed murder. What about this gun? If there had been no murder, why had Jerome Ander stolen out of the house after dark to drop it into a sewer?

Alec now felt that he had enough evidence to justify action of a more drastic nature. He wanted to take a look at the furnace in the cellar and find out if anything had been burned there. But before he could do that, there were other things to do.

He flagged a taxicab, drove down to his office, got the envelope containing the bullet from the drawer of his desk and took it and the gun over to Police Headquarters where he turned them over to a ballistics expert.

"Get other cartridges and make tests," he told the expert. "Find out if the markings on them coincide with the ones on this bullet. How long will it take?"

"Only a few hours," the ballistics man answered. "Call me up tomorrow morning, or later tonight, if you wish."

"Maybe I'll call tonight," said Alec, and walked out of the room.

On his way back to Greenwich Village, he stopped at a hardware store to purchase a large and heavy screwdriver, a flashlight, and a strong chisel. Then he dined at a small restaurant, eating in a leisurely fashion in order to consume all the time he could. Finally he went over to Washington Park and sat on a bench for several hours, smoking numerous cigarettes.

At last he rose to his feet and set off for the dwelling on Vine Street. If District Attorney Crowley had only known he intended to commit an act of unlawful entry upon the Ander home—well! What would he say to that?

CHAPTER VIII

Deep Is the Grave

IT WAS an easy matter to find the side entrance to the house. Alec took out the screwdriver and was about to jimmy open the door when he discovered it wasn't locked. In fact, it wasn't even closed tightly and he grasped the idea that someone again must have returned furtively and neglected to lock up.

This was indeed a break and he took advantage of it.

Cautiously Alec stepped into the basement hallway and soon found the steps leading into the cellar.

The stairway was narrow and squeaked underfoot, so Alec sat down, removed his shoes, tied them together by the laces and hung them around his neck. Then he continued downward.

Using his flashlight, he soon located the oil burning furnace and headed for it. He opened the furnace door and threw the beam inside. Then he stuck his head and shoulders through the wide door. It was plenty wide enough to pass a human body through.

There were ashes on the furnace floor. He knew that oil burners create no ash and Alec's heart pounded furiously. He withdrew, found a wide flat board and removed some of the ash. That was all he did find—ash. There were no bones, no buttons or jewelry. Just delicate ash. Even the heat of an oil burner couldn't dispose of a corpse quite so completely.

Something else had been burned in this furnace, something someone wanted to get rid of badly. Alex recalled the column of smoke coming from the chimney the night before. It had been done immediately after he left the house.

Against the fire bricks, directly beneath the draft outlet, Alec noticed a fairly solid wad of stuff. He got this out and looked at it. It was charred canvas. Alec nodded. Canvas meant paintings and paintings pointed straight at Kip.

Finally he straightened up and stood there,

staring down at the wad of blackened canvas. What did this mean? Here was another mystery which seemed almost impossible of solution.

Why had Kip Ander hurried down here in the middle of the night in order to destroy one of his paintings? Evidently he had considered this action so vital that it could not be delayed until morning — not a minute longer than necessary. What was the reason for such strange conduct? Was it the portrait of Judith? Alec remembered Kip had said he was using her for a model. Probably not. Also that Mrs. Ander had said Kip made a specialty of painting heads.

This gave Alec an idea and he smiled broadly. He believed that he had hit on the answer.

At that moment he heard a noise behind him and whirled around. It was Judith Ander. She had managed to steal down the cellar steps without a sound. Now she confronted Alec with flashing eyes.

"What does this mean, Mr. Hart?" she demanded. "What are you doing in our house?"

For a moment or two Alec Hart could only stare at her with open mouth. Of all the persons in the Ander household, she was the last one he would have wanted to surprise him while he was snooping. He reddened with shame.

The girl stamped her foot.

"Answer me!" she cried. "Do you think this is honorable, to break into places in the middle of the night and spy on people?"

Alec's philosophy came to his aid. He shrugged. There was nothing else to do.

"After all, it's my business, Judith," he said. "I'm a District Attorney. The taxpayers want me to investigate possible crimes and members of your family are taxpayers, aren't they?" He had recovered from his confusion by this time. He grinned at her. "In other words the Ander family is paying me to snoop around in the Ander cellar."

Judith stared at him with widened eyes.

"Oh!" she ejaculated, taken aback by this barefaced effrontery. Her lips tightened. "I'm going to find out what you're doing."

Turning on her heel, she hurried over to the electric switch and snapped on the electric lights. The sudden glare caused Alec to blink.

"How did you know I was down here?" he asked.

She came back.

"I was sitting in my room upstairs, reading, and I saw you come sneaking up the court from the street," she said, her voice trembling with scorn. "I knew you were up to something and I suspected it would be this. So I put on my clothes and came down. I was right, too."

"You'd rather be right than—read," Alec paraphrased.

THE girl paid no attention. She was investigating. She soon found the wad of blackened canvas which Alec had retrieved from the furnace, and turned over the scorched fragments with the toe of her slipper.

"Yes, it's what's left of one of your Dad's paintings," Alec said. "Last night, after I left this house, he stole down here to burn it up. In the middle of the night. He must have considered it important. He couldn't even wait until morning. Which one of them was it, Judith?"

He heard her draw in her breath sharply. She gave him a quick glance and he sensed that she was panic-stricken. She knew all about that painting which Kip had destroyed. Alec was positive of it. But she merely shook her head. There is nothing a woman can do which is quite so exasperating to a man as this, and Alec lost his temper. He took three quick steps forward and seized her by the wrist.

"You can tell me all about that painting if you'll only open up!" he cried angrily. "Out with it! Whose portrait was it?"

She started to struggle so Alec seized her by the other wrist. She resisted furiously, twisting this way and that, and he had difficulty in holding her.

"Let me go!" she panted.

She was lithe and strong and he had to hold her tight in order to keep her from getting away. He put one arm around her slender waist and drew her to him. This brought her pretty face close to his and her moist red lips into tempting proximity with his own. In the next instant he altered his purpose and gave way to an overmastering impulse.

Then her lips were pressing against his and yielding up their sweetness. For a brief interval he could have sworn she responded. That kiss seemed to feed liquid fire into his veins.

Then she wrenched herself free and raged at him like a wildcat.

"Oh, you brute!" she flared. "You beast! How dare you!"

Alec hadn't meant to kiss her, but it was too late now. All he could do was smile at her.

"I'm not going to say I'm sorry, because

I'm not," he said. "I've been wanting to do that ever since I first saw you."

"I ought to slap your face," she said, glaring at him. But she hadn't moved. She was still standing there. Alec promptly reached out, took her in his arms, and kissed her again. This time she didn't struggle quite so much.

Finally he released her.

"Now run upstairs and tell your father all about it," he suggested. "From now on, there is one thing he can't say—that is, that you've never been kissed."

"I know why you did that," she said. "You think I'm a fool. You think you can get me to tell you about that painting. Well, I won't do it!"

Alec turned away.

"Oh, I know you'll never tell me, now," he said. "Nevertheless I'm going to search this cellar."

"What do you think you'll find?" she asked curiously.

"Evidence of a crime," he said lightly, glancing at her. "I might even find a corpse. Who knows?"

"Then go ahead and search," she told him hotly. "What kind of people do you think we are? The Ander family are not criminals, as you pretend to believe."

"I need to find a corpse," he answered. "Thus far I haven't found any and if I don't run across one soon, I'm sunk." He pointed across the cellar. "What's that?"

"The vegetable storage room." The girl's voice was scornful. "If you hunt there, you'll find potatoes. Plenty of them."

Alec approached the wooden door of the waist high compartment and tried to open it. It was fastened with a steel hasp. He grasped the hasp and gave it a yank. It refused to open. He gave it a harder yank and the door yielded, to an accompaniment of scrapes and groans. Using his flashlight again, Alec stepped inside, with the girl close behind him.

All that his first quick glance revealed was a rough dirt floor and some bins built against one wall, filled with potatoes, onions, carrots and other stuff just as she had told him. Alec saw an electric bulb hanging from the ceiling and a chain to turn it on. He pulled the chain and the light glowed.

The light helped. He could see plainly now.

"There," said Judith, entering the room too. "You see?"

Alec did see. He saw something that she had evidently not noticed—a large oblong place in the dirt floor where the dirt had been newly disturbed. It had all the appearance of a grave, freshly dug. Such a grave would have easily contained the body of a human being. It was situated in the corner where it would least likely be noticed. Judith's eyes followed his glance and she gave a startled ejaculation. There was no doubt that she was genuinely surprised and shocked by what she saw.

"Oh, Alec!" she cried. "What is it? What does it mean?"

SHE went to him as naturally as a child, seeking protection. He put one arm around her waist.

Although it confirmed his suspicioins, for some reason Alec Hart did not feel a bit elated.

"I'm afraid to say what it means," he answered. "You know, without my telling you." He felt her shudder and press more tightly against him. "I expected to find something like this, yet I'm sorry I did. Truly sorry. You know that, Judith."

"It's horrible!" she said with a gasp. "Oh, Alec! I never dreamed of such a thing, truly I didn't. I thought you were just being officious. But I'm sure nobody in this house knew about it either. There isn't a person in the Ander family who would kill a flea."

"I hope not." Gently he released her. "Is there a shovel anywhere around here?"

"A steel snow shovel over in the corner outside." Then the implication of his words struck her. "Oh, Alec, surely you're not going to—going to—dig anything up. That would be ghastly."

"Not so ghastly as burying it," Alec answered in grim tones. "Well, that's one of the minor duties of an Assistant District Attorney—digging up corpses. Be a good girl now and show me where to find the shovel."

She gave him one panic-stricken glance and then led him to a corner of the cellar where there was a long handled scoop standing against the wall. He took the scoop hefted it and then went back to the vegetable compartment. She trailed along, as if lured by a dreadful kind of fascination. Suddenly a thought struck him and he halted.

"Perhaps you'd better go upstairs," he suggested. "This may not turn out to be pleasant.

"No," she answered. "I'm going to see this thing through."

Without further remonstrance, he went to work, throwing out huge shovelfuls of earth. The ground was crumbly, easy to work with, having only recently been disturbed. He

made fast progress, piling up the loam to one side of the hole, just as professional gravediggers are supposed to do. The girl stood on the opposite side of the hole, staring down as he went deeper and deeper.

As he worked, Alec was thinking.

With a corpse buried in the cellar of their house, the Anders would no longer be able to use their power and influence. The corpse would convict them, point straight at one or more of the family. Judith, of course, would be in the clear. Or would she be? The thought sent a chill through Alec.

The grave was deep—much deeper than Alec expected. With each shovelful, Judith shuddered but bravely held her place. She showed surprising courage and Alec felt growing admiration for the way she was meeting this crisis in her life.

Strangely, the gruesomeness of the setting didn't impress Alec now. He was too busy with swirling thoughts about Judith, Kip, Peter and all the others. Too busy wondering who the victim at his feet really was.

It was hard work. He had to pause, finally, to rest.

"Atta girl," he told her encouragingly. "It'll soon be over."

She smiled at him wanly, even tried to joke. "I hope you dig up a bushel of potatoes."

Alec didn't answer that. People didn't bury spoiled potatoes in this fashion—not so deep as this. When he had rested somewhat, he went to work again, working more slowly and more methodically now that his first excitement had abated. Gradually the mound of earth grew larger and the hole deeper.

It was shaped roughly like a regulation grave. Perhaps a few inches shorter, but certainly just as wide. Alec moved the candle closer, thrust the shovel deep and felt it strike something solid but yielding. He shivered and felt like abandoning the whole project.

Abandoning the project would have simplified matters. District Attorney Crowley would congratulate him and would be only too willing to forgive and forget. Kip Ander would welcome him to the house if he gave up now. And Kip was Judith's father. This in itself was a temptation. Since Alec had kissed Judith, held her warm slender body in his arms, he was astonished to discover the strength of the attachment which he had developed for her. It might mean marriage and the weight of the powerful Ander family behind his future. And Alec Hart was both young and ambitious.

Nevertheless something held him to it, the same dogged determination which had kept him going up until now. He was not by nature a quitter. He found it impossible to abandon the task.

He continued to work cautiously, certain he'd uncover a corpse at any moment.

Judith heard him utter a startled cry. Then he stepped back.

"What is it?" she asked. "You're standing in the way. I can't see."

He moved so his shadow didn't obscure her view.

"Look!" he said. "It's not what we expected."

JUDITH gazed into the hole and started to laugh. Her mirth was almost hysterical.

Alec put his arm about her. Judith continued to laugh while he continued to stare at what he'd found.

In the grave, stretched full length, lay a huge German shepherd dog.

"Stop it." Alec glanced at the girl. "You don't have to be so darned happy as that."

"But I am," Judith said with another laugh. "I've been so worried, Alec. And you've been so wrong. Can't you see, now, how ridiculous your suspicions of the Anders have been all along?"

"Let's get out of here." Alec walked out into the cellar proper and Judith went too.

She was still smiling. All her confidence had returned. Plainly she was enjoying the joke on Alec. This wasn't good for his conceit, but nevertheless he was glad for her sake.

"All right," he said, "I was wrong. But I was right in other matters you don't know about. Yet one thing worries me."

"What is it?" Her eyes were sparkling and there were dimples in her cheeks. "What worries you, Mr. Assistant District Attorney?"

"Where did the dog come from? Why is it buried in the cellar, of all places? What killed it?"

"I don't know and I don't care," she retorted. "You can't arrest people because they happen to have a dead dog buried in the cellar."

"I was told there'd never been a dog in this house," Alec said sharply. "I heard that neither Peter nor Mrs. Ander would have one around."

"That's true," Judith remarked. "But Alfred Porter didn't share their sentiments. He was fond of animals. He was always sneaking them upstairs to his laboratory. A few days before I got home from school, he and Grandma had a fearful row because he

picked up an injured dog in the street and sneaked him upstairs to his workroom to nurse him. They were still quarreling about it the first night I was here." Her eyes widened. "Why, maybe that is the dog! He said it was a German shepherd. Day before yesterday he told me it was so hopelessly hurt, he might have to put it out of its misery. I'll bet that's what he did! And buried it down here!"

"Perhaps." Alec was far from satisfied. "How did he propose to kill it. Chloroform or with a pistol?"

"Poison, I think. He was experimenting with poisons. He said he knew of something which would be painless."

Alec eyed her thoughtfully for a moment or two.

"Well, you go upstairs while I refill the grave," he suggested finally. "Then I'll be up to see you. There are other questions I want to ask you."

Her eyes glowed.

"Good. I'll wait for you in the dining room. We won't disturb anybody in the house if we talk there."

He gathered her into his arms then and held her close, thrilling to her trembling nearness. Judith lifted her face, and they kissed, long and ardently. Then she was gone, leaving him to remember the intoxicating perfume of her hair.

Lightly she fled up the stairway while Peter used his flashlight to illuminate her path. A moment later he heard the door at the top of the flight open and then close again, softly.

After she had gone Alec stood there, for a short while, staring after her and thinking. He slowly returned to the vegetable cellar, knelt down beside the grave, and spent about five minutes examining the dog. There was no bullet hole or wound on the carcass.

Then he hastily shoveled the earth back into the grave, put out the lights and started up the steps, using his flashlight to illuminate the way. At the top of the flight he detected a shadowy figure waiting for him.

"Judith?" he said, surprised that she had returned.

Before he could raise the flashlight a foot lashed out and kicked it out of his hand. Then a second kick, following instantly, struck him in the chest.

Alec was knocked off his feet. The kick launched him into space and he went whirling back down the flight, striking the steps halfway down. Vaguely he felt a stab of pain. Then the only sensation he had was that of falling, falling. . . .

CHAPTER IX

An Ultimatum to Kip Ander

LATER Alec was dimly aware of being lifted by someone and carried.

I'm going to be murdered, he thought, and tried to send enough energy through his stunned nerves and muscles to put up a fight. It was impossible. His limbs would not respond. He was helpless.

Finally, after a time, he was placed on a bed and strong hands eased him down gently. A finger moved back one eyelid, but Alec saw nothing other than a gray blur. He was slowly becoming aware of a terrific pain at the back of his head. He could hear voices too—they seemed miles away.

Then a strong antiseptic was gently swabbed over his head and the sharp, violent pain it induced snapped his senses back out of the fog. He groaned, opened his eyes and looked up into Dr. Bob Prentice's stern face.

"Feeling better?" Prentice asked with a wry smile. "I was just thinking—if it so happened I was a murderer, as you probably suspect—this would certainly be an excellent opportunity to get rid of the only man who suspects me."

That didn't make much sense to Alec's befuddled brain. He was conscious only of pain and a near brush with death.

"Somebody — threw me down the cellar stairs. I couldn't see him. I never had a chance."

"Nevertheless, you're a lucky man, Mr. Hart," the doctor said. "You must have hit several steps on your way down. Then landed on the cement floor with terrific force. There's a crease on the back of your head. It's the closest thing to a fracture I've seen in some time. You're bruised generally, but nothing serious."

Alec tried to sit up.

"Where is Judith?"

"She's waiting in the next room," Prentice said. "Incidentally, it was she who heard you tumble down the steps and who raised an alarm. I had just gone to bed. Kip and I carried you to this room. It's Peter's old room. I hope you have better luck than he did."

"How long since it happened, doc?"

"Oh—half an hour perhaps. You were unconscious. Now I think you might sit up

so I can bandage your skull. I'll make you look real pretty. Will you have it turban style?"

Alec managed to grin.

"You decide. Doc, will I be here long?"

"I doubt it, from the way Kip is acting." Prentice gave a chuckle. "It seems Judith confessed she was the one who let you into the house for some nefarious work down in the cellar. Kip is boiling. I think that nothing short of two broken legs will keep Kip from kicking you out on your—er—posterior."

"Want to bet on that?" Alec asked.

Prentice, in the act of unrolling bandage, fumbled the roll and almost dropped it. The bantering tone was gone from his voice when he talked.

"No, I wouldn't. You're a rather amazing young man. It so happens I like you even though you may think I had something to do with Peter's death and—despite the fact that Judith seems to have developed a liking for you. I had plans for that girl."

"I've some too. Doc, have you any idea who waited for me on the landing in the cellar and kicked me down that flight of stairs?"

"I'm afraid not. I was in my room when I heard Judith scream. Naturally we all woke up. All except Mrs. Ander. She sleeps quite heavily and, being on the third floor, you can understand why she didn't awaken. Young Porter failed to show up either, but he has probably got his nose stuck over some test tube."

"Just who did show up, doc?"

"Kip, of course. And Jerome. They both came out of their rooms almost as quickly as I did. We all hurried downstairs and found Judith there. I don't know her story but then, you'd rather hear it from her lips."

"Thanks, doc," Alec said. "You're pretty decent about this."

"No reason why I shouldn't be. However, I've one more thing to say. Judith has been sheltered too much by her father. She's spent much of her time away at school and knows very little about life. If you are trying to play ducks and drakes with her, so help me, you really will get yourself a fractured skull!"

"What if I want her to marry me?" Alec asked.

The words surprised Alec. He hadn't intended to say anything like that. But now that it was out, he was well content.

PRENTICE carefully applied adhesive to the gauze around Alec's head.

"That would alter matters, so far as I am concerned," he said. "But I don't know how Kip would take it."

Alec made no comment. He changed the subject.

"Doc," he said. "What about that dog in the cellar? Did you see it?"

Prentice laughed and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I suppose I'm responsible for that. I know all about the dog. You see, Porter has a soft heart despite his eternal test tubes and what people say about him. This dog was hit by a taxi right in front of the house just a few days ago. Porter carried it into the house. Mrs. Ander was not at home at the time or he'd never have gotten away with it."

"And he kept the dog in his laboratory, trying to nurse it?" Alec asked.

"He did," Prentice answered as he shrugged. "Porter asked me to examine the dog. It was suffering from internal injuries, but I thought it might come around. It got worse and finally after you left last night, I injected a lethal dose. Since he had already told Mrs. Ander he'd gotten rid of the dog, we didn't dare send for someone to take the animal away. We finally decided to dig a grave in the vegetable cellar. That's all there is to it, my boy."

"Tell me," Alec said slowly. "Are you sure there's nothing else buried under the dog, in the same grave?"

Prentice looked at Alec keenly and seemed to be doing a good deal of thinking before he ventured a reply.

"That's a unique idea," he said. "You're a pretty shrewd young man. But you're wrong. There's nothing down there except the dog."

Alec continued to study his face searchingly.

"You're sure it was poison you used, and not a gun?" he asked. "You didn't shoot him with a gun, for instance, down in the library?"

"Where?" said Dr. Prentice, startled. "Where?"

"In the big red leather chair," Alec said quickly.

For just one instant Prentice's eyes flickered. Then his face became a placid mask once more.

"You're talking in riddles," he replied. He began stowing his equipment away and adroitly changed the conversation.

"I'd advise you to take things easy for a few hours at least," he said. "If that headache you undoubtedly have, doesn't go away in twenty-four hours, see your own doctor

and tell him to look for a mild fracture. Personally, I doubt there is one. Some people are quite thick-headed."

Prentice picked up his bag and walked out of the room. A few seconds later Judith came in—alone, much to Alec's relief.

"I persuaded Dad to let me come in and see you." She sat down beside the bed and surveyed him with a frown of displeasure. "Alec, what's the idea. Are you going to keep this up? After finding that dog in the cellar?"

"Oh, yeah?" He glared right back at her. "After someone kicked me down a flight of steps and tried to kill me? What was the idea of doing that unless he had something to cover up—a murder, for instance? If you hadn't heard me tumble down the steps, he'd have probably followed it up and killed me. Wake up, Judith! What happened ought to convince you there's a murderer loose in the house!"

"Did you see him?" she asked, after a moment of thought. "Who was it?"

"I don't know. He was at the very top of the steps and hidden by shadows."

"Dad and Doctor Prentice looked at the cellar steps, Alec. They saw marks indicating you slipped off the edge of the step and had fallen backwards. There were no marks on your chest to indicate you'd been kicked. Prentice told us that."

"So your father claims I'm lying. Bring him in here, Judith."

She hesitated.

"Alec, he's wild. I told him about things. I had to. He threatened to have you arrested for breaking into the house, so I said I let you in, and he guessed the rest."

"Good. I'm glad. Don't worry about your father. Just send him in here and then wait for me outside. I won't be long."

Kip sauntered into the room and sat down. He was holding a burning cigarette between his stained fingers.

"Well, Alec," he said. The smile on his lips was friendly enough but the glint in his eyes was malignant. "I see you have disobeyed Mr. Crowley's orders? You came here to annoy us some more?"

"Yes, but I'm not staying," Alec said coldly. "I intend to get out of here as fast as I can, once I'm through with you. Judith tells me you pretend to believe I'm lying about the incident on the cellar stairway. You are saying that I slipped off a step, that there's a mark which proves I skidded and that I just made up the story about being kicked down the steps."

KIP'S cigarette bobbed up and down between his lips. He didn't bother to remove it as he talked.

"Yes, Doctor Prentice also saw the mark. You're sore now because Judy knows you're a faker."

"I want you to do me a favor," Alec said as he smiled. "I can't leave until I have my shoes. I took them off and slung them around my neck before I climbed the cellar stairs. They must be still there on the floor in the cellar. I really need shoes—even if my feet are so tough they leave skid marks on stairways."

That jolted Kip. He lost his false benign expression.

"What do you want, Alec? Of us, I mean. Why do you insist that we're a pack of murderers yet claim to have great affection for my daughter?"

"Because both facts are true. I do know someone in this house is a killer. Also I am in love with your daughter. Furthermore, it isn't the money she represents either, nor am I using her as an excuse to get into the house. I can get in here any time I choose."

"I think I'll let you prove that, Alec," Kip bristled. "Yes, I'll enjoy it very much. The next time you set foot on these premises I'll personally punch your nose. Now you can get out. The quicker you go the better for you and don't start asking a lot of fool questions, because they won't be answered."

"I intend to see Judith again," Alec warned him.

"I am sending Judy away," Kip snapped. "She'll get over this silly attraction for you fast enough. Now leave or, by heavens, I'll boot you out."

Alec held his temper in check only because he knew that Judith was in the next room.

"Kip," he said, "There is just one question I insist upon asking. Answer it truthfully and I won't bother you again."

"Well?" Kip roared.

Alec asked a question in a voice dripping with sweet innocence.

"Tell me—whose portrait did you burn in the furnace?" he said. "I'm curious to know why you stole down in the middle of the night. Why did you burn it and then stir up the ashes like a criminal hiding something?"

Kip didn't answer. He arose and started for the door. Alec called him to a halt.

"Until that question is satisfactorily answered, I wouldn't send Judith away. Not unless she wants to go. And I wouldn't talk about punching other people's noses, Kip. Furthermore, think this over. I'll find out what you destroyed sooner or later. If you

talk before I discover the answer, things may be a lot easier for you."

Again Kip made no reply although his face flamed in anger and his mouth half opened as if to roar a challenge.

"Stay put for a moment," Alec ordered, and Kip obeyed meekly enough. Alec raised his voice to a shout, summoning Judith into the room. Kip moved aside and they stood there, father and daughter. They were amazingly unlike one another. Kip was belligerent, hard and cruel, Judith amiable and lovely.

"Judith, do you want to go away from this house?" Alec said.

"Well . . . If father thinks—"

She gave her father a side-long glance.

"Never mind what Father thinks," Alec roared. "I'm asking you. Do you want to go? What's the answer, Judith?"

"No! I want to stay here."

"Good. Then that's settled. If you do disappear, I'll know it was your father's doing and I'll give him the works. You know what that means, don't you Kip? We have a little understanding about things. Now will somebody get my shoes from the cellar?"

Kip was almost speechless with fury, but there was nothing he could do about it physically. The only course left for him was to glare at Alec and Judith.

CHAPTER X

A Mysterious Summons

JUDITH seemed only too anxious to avoid her father's belligerent gaze. She hurried out of the room to bring the shoes upstairs. Kip continued to glower after her but said nothing. Alec had another idea then. Since from all indications he had Kip Ander's shoulders down on the mat, he decided to issue another warning.

"Incidentally, Kip," he said, "if Crowley, my boss, jumps down my throat for still working on this matter, I'll know you must have issued another complaint about me. I'm pretty sure I've got enough stuff now to interest Crowley in this investigation. And Crowley isn't in love with your daughter, so he might turn out to be a lot rougher than I am."

Kip had no time to answer. The front door opened and then closed with a terrific bang. Unsteady feet marched along the reception hall and up the steps, sliding and slipping every few steps. Once the newcomer must have fallen, from the crash he made and the round curses he delivered.

"It's Noble," Kip said. "Drunk again. Something has to be done about that boy before he runs into d.t.'s. I'd better see to him, Hart. And I—ah—won't complain about you to Crowley. Not right now, at least."

Alec grinned at him and nodded. With a smothered curse, Kip stalked out of the room.

After he had left, Alec got up, found a telephone book, looked up a number and then called the ballistics expert at Police Headquarters. The expert wasn't there, but his assistant gave Alec the information.

"The bullet was fired by the gun you gave us," the assistant said. "We made exhaustive tests. The evidence is conclusive."

"Good," Alec said. "Thanks a lot. I'll call by and get the report just as soon as I get a chance." He hung up.

Judith returned with his shoes and sat in silence while he put them on and drew the laces tight. Alec looked up.

"I've got your father tamed and if you want to know the truth, I doubt very much he is implicated in this killing business. A guilty man wouldn't have given in quite so easily."

"Did you blackmail him by means of those pieces of burnt canvas?" she asked. "I suppose you know I took those pieces and destroyed them?"

"I guessed it," Alec told her with a smile. "It doesn't make a particle of difference, darling. I had to blackmail him so he wouldn't send you away. We heard Noble come in. Did you see him?"

Judith nodded.

"He didn't see me, though," she replied. "I stepped back into a room when he stumbled up the stairs. He was very drunk."

"I wonder where he gets the money," Alec said. "It takes a lot of cash to get a good bun on these days. Also, I wonder why he drinks himself stiff so often. Did he always do that?"

"I don't know. You forget, Alec, that this is my first visit home in months."

"So I do." Alec offered her a cigarette.

"I don't smoke, thanks," she said. "Do you feel all right. Are you sure you ought to leave?"

"I've got to," Alec said. "I'm okay though, except for a headache and a pretty sore spot on my scalp. Doc fixed me up. Where were you when it all began? I mean—when I was

kicked down the steps."

"Waiting in the kitchen," she said. "I heard a crash."

"You hurried right out into the hall?"

"No. At first I didn't think it was anything. It sounded almost as if it came from outside. Then I heard you moan. I ran to the cellar. I screamed bloody murder when I saw you down there."

"You didn't see anybody?"

She shook her head.

"No, Alec. But you're beginning all over again. Those questions, the way you look at me—and everyone else."

"I never pretended to have quit," Alec reminded her. "How can I quit now? Especially after an attempt was made on my life. It proves there was a murder and that I'm getting too close or being too persistent. The murderer doesn't like it."

"I'm going to my room." Judith arose. Plainly she was offended. "I'm not sure I want to see you again, Alec. I can't permit myself to stay in love with a man who keeps trying to turn my family into a group of murderers. Don't say anything—please. Just let me go."

When she had gone, Alec sighed and lay back on the bed to rest. He closed his eyes and tried to sort out the events of the last three days. They were still in a confused jumble when he heard someone moving down the hall. He opened his eyes just as the footsteps paused at the doorway.

IT WAS Suzanne. She was clad in a long cotton nightgown and a dark dressing robe. She saw him looking at her and registered her disapproval by a deep scowl. Then she went back to her room.

This incident crystallized Alec Hart's purpose. He decided it was high time to leave. He didn't like some members of this mysterious household, especially Suzanne. He didn't like people who crept down hallways of a house where a murder had been committed in the middle of the night. Also he felt strong enough to go now. And Judith was offended with him.

So he got painfully off the bed, buttoned his shirt, put on his tie and donned his coat. He looked in the mirror, touched the bandage on his head, winced and crept softly downstairs.

Then he quietly let himself out of the house by the front door and walked slowly home.

What he called home was a hotel room, the loneliest place on earth for all those people who have neither family nor dependents.

It was almost dawn. Lower New York was still asleep. Alec had been wary of another attempt on his life but now, in the silence and grayness, he was beset with a strange calm. It enabled him to think. He wondered whether that attack upon him on the cellar stairs had been premeditated or something done on the spur of the moment. If it was premeditated, the attacker must have seen either him or Judith going into the cellar. If done on the spur of the moment, the murderer must have seen Judith as she left the cellar, guessed what was going on and decided to do something about it.

She claimed she had observed no one and Alec believed her. She said she had heard him fall, waited a few moments and then hurried downstairs without passing anyone. Kip and Jerome had popped out of their rooms when Judith screamed, according to Dr. Prentice. That left Suzanne hardly a likely subject for Alec was sure he'd seen a pair of trousered legs at the top of the cellar steps. Mrs. Ander was out of the question also. He doubted such a small, delicate woman could have delivered so powerful a kick.

Which left Alfred Porter, secluded in his top floor laboratory and sleeping quarters, as the guilty party. Yes, it could have been Porter. No one had kept track of him.

Noble Sanborn might have been responsible except for the fact that no man, as drunk as he was, could have balanced himself and rendered that kick. Unless Noble wasn't quite as drunk as he pretended. The bars had closed almost three hours before Noble returned.

Some of his drunkenness should have worn off, unless he'd equipped himself with a bottle or found a gin mill that never looked at the clock so long as hard cash was coming over the bar.

Alec would have sacrificed a lot to determine just how drunk Noble was.

District Attorney Crowley telephoned at seven the next morning, some forty minutes after Alec had fallen into a disturbed doze. Alec still wasn't thoroughly asleep when the phone rang. The instrument was directly beside his bed and he answered the call promptly.

"Good morning, good morning," Crowley said in his sonorous tones. "I like to see young men up and coming very early in the day. I hop out of bed at six myself. I've a surprise for you, Alec."

"I'm just ripe for surprises," Alec said.

"I thought so. Now you're the newest and greenest man on my staff. Yet I knew from

the moment I interviewed you that you had the stuff. So here is your chance. Last night, in an interview with a newspaper reporter, I said I'd given you full charge of the gambling crusade. So you'll get ample credit. How many cases have you got?"

"Seventy-one of them."

"Fine, swell, excellent! This proves I'm grateful to you for dropping that Ander matter as I suggested. It shows you are smart, my boy. That sort of thing gets you places, Alec. I'm older than you, more experienced, and I know. Just be guided by me and you'll end up just like I am, with an important job and lots of influential friends. Good morning, Alec. I expect great things from you."

Alec muttered thanks and Crowley hung up. All chance of getting to sleep now was gone. He arose, and knew he couldn't cold-shower himself back to consciousness, not with his scalp lacerated and bandaged. Neither could he go into court looking like a mummy from the eyebrows up.

HE STEPPED before a mirror and cautiously removed the adhesive and bandage. He affixed a much smaller dressing. Then he shaved and dressed and cursed. He should be up at the Ander house trying to snare a cold-blooded killer. Instead he must waste his time in court, prosecuting a motley assortment of card shufflers who had been arrested in the name of civic purity.

He'd have to match wits with some of the slimiest lawyers in town. These gamblers picked attorneys who specialized in slyness. He'd have to be on the watch for technicalities—and he should be going back to bed for another eight hours.

He ate a breakfast that tasted peculiarly flat, cursed Crowley between bites of toast and reached the courts building half an hour before the committing magistrate showed up. He'd had one day to prepare seventy-one cases.

Before the magistrate appeared, Alec took time to call up the pathological laboratory and request them to send a man after the body of the dog which he had discovered in the Ander cellar. He asked that an autopsy be performed on the animal and tests be made to discover what had killed it. The director of the laboratory promised that this should be done at once. Then Alec hurried back to the courtroom.

Nolan was there waiting for him, but Nolan only wanted to talk about the Ander murder. He slipped Alec a half empty box of cartridges.

"I found these tucked away in an old carton in back of the Ander home." He eyed the bandage on Alec's head curiously. "What happened to you? Did some drunk bounce a bottle off your head?"

"One of our pals at the Ander house kicked me down the cellar steps last night."

"No kidding?" Nolan whistled. "You said something about digging up a corpse last night. How'd you make out?"

"I dug up a dead dog and something tells me that dog means just as much to us as if I'd found a murdered man in that grave. I just phoned the pathological laboratories to have an expert look at the dog and find out what killed it. Now tell me about your search for Nick Norris."

Nolan did. He hadn't found Norris. But many hotel clerks had been questioned. Then he went back to the Ander affair.

"A death certificate on Peter was filed. It says he died accidentally. I understand the funeral was yesterday. They didn't wait long and they cremated the old man. Best way ever invented for destroying evidence."

"The only evidence destroyed with Peter was in his brain and that died with him," Alec observed. "Peter knew all the answers, Erf. He knew who was killed, who did the killing and the whys and wherefores. You and I are just a couple of mortals who—Stand up, Erf! Here comes His Honor."

For the remainder of that morning Alec concentrated on the cases before him.

Just before recess Sergeant Nolan slipped a piece of paper in front of him. It was the report from the pathological laboratories, to the effect that the dog showed no signs of having been injured and that its death was directly due to a large quantity of hydrocyanic acid which had been injected into a piece of beef and fed the dog.

"Our Doctor Bob Prentice is a blasted liar," Alec whispered to Nolan. "The dog didn't die the way he says."

The afternoon was a repetition of the morning—without the development of any new facts in the Ander affair. At the end of the day Alec felt as wilted as the prisoners who were being given the sentences usually meted out to their kind of cheap tin-horn chiseler and petty gambler.

The combination of a blow on the head, little or no sleep and a gruelling day had taken full toll of Alec's stamina.

Thirty minutes after court was over, he reached his hotel room and stumbled toward the bed.

Without bothering to remove more than his coat, vest, tie and shoes, he flopped across it and was asleep instantly.

CHAPTER XI

A Surprise from Judith

PERSISTENT jangling disturbed Alec Hart, hours later. He groaned, rolled himself deeper into the spread which alone covered him and steadfastly refused to recognize the presence of this disturbing element.

It kept on until he finally sat up and realized the telephone was making that infernal racket. More asleep than awake, he reached for the instrument. A man's voice came to him, barely penetrating his fogged brain.

"Alec, if you want to see something of the greatest interest, come to the Dresden Room of the Hotel Regal. Don't miss it."

"Wh-what? What did you say? Hey—who is this? Who's talking"

But the man at the other end of the line was gone.

Alec dropped the phone back on its cradle and rubbed sleep out of his eyes.

"Dresden Room!" Alec put his head between both hands. "What could be of interest to me there"

Yet he knew he'd go. That voice had been vaguely familiar, its message urgently solemn. He glanced at his wrist watch and was surprised to find that it was nine o'clock. Although he'd only slept five hours, he felt much more rested.

The Dresden Room was a tuxedo spot, sedate and very high class. He shaved and cleaned up and then put on his tux. Downstairs, at the hotel bar, he ate two sandwiches, drank a glass of beer and bought a couple of packages of cigarettes. He actually felt good when the taxi delivered him to the swanky entrance of the hotel.

The Dresden Room, as usual, was crowded. Alec asked for a corner table from which he could survey the room. He ordered a meal, despite the husky appetizer he'd eaten at his own hotel.

Before the first course was served, he saw Judith Ander! Here—in one of New York's swankiest hot spots!

At first it was too incredible to believe. If she hadn't been dancing with Noble Sanborn, Alec might never have noticed her at all. But it was Judith! Not the Judith who posed for portraits of saints, who wasn't permitted to go out, to dress well or live like an ordinary girl.

This was Judith in a pale blue evening gown, sleek and snug. Judith with contours Alec had never even suspected. Judith with carefully colored cheeks, well-shaped, bright red lips and cleverly arranged hair.

Alec arose and walked in a dazed fashion between the tables, through the dancing crowd until he reached her. Judith saw him first for Noble's back was turned.

Her eyes widened with surprise when she saw him; then smiled at him. Alec tapped Noble on the shoulder.

"Say 'No' and I'll slug you," he said and moved into Judith's arms.

"Hello, Alec," Noble said. "Thanks for rescuing me. I'm heading for the bar."

Neither Alec nor Judith answered him. They were dancing in a completely private world and quite incapable of speech until the number ended. Then they stood in the middle of the floor, earnestly looking into one another's eyes.

Judith didn't appear a bit flustered. Of the two, she was much the calmer. Alec had never seen her dressed up before and he was amazed at how pretty she was. She took his arm, they walked to his table, and sat down.

"Why don't you say something, Alec?" she asked.

"I don't believe it!" he said. "I can't! The only thing about you that is the same is your voice."

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Then you approve of the change?"

"Yes. How did you ever get by the old wolf?"

"You taught me that houses have back doors. Noble asked me out and I went."

"But the gown—the makeup. Your hair. Judy, I didn't even think you knew about these things."

"There's heaps you don't know about me, Alec. Do you like me, really?"

"You're the ultra-supreme in a whole orchard of peaches. You've got every other girl in this place stopped cold, and there are plenty of good lookers here, too. As for me—well, I'm still dazed. I know that clothes can make a lot of difference but I never expected anything like this. You're wonderful!"

WITH her pretty chin resting on her folded hands, she sat opposite him, pretending to consider what he had said.

"That's pretty good, Alec," she said. "I don't know when I've ever heard a smoother line. I'll bet you've told that to at least a hundred girls. If you keep it up, I'll be be-

lieving you again, and then you can pump me for more information to convict the members of my family."

Alec winced.

"Can't you see I mean it? What makes you say that, Judy?"

"Because you followed me here. That means you've been spying on the Anders again."

Alec reddened. "Somebody called me up and tipped me off you were here."

"Telephoned you?" she repeated blankly.

"Yes. A man phoned my hotel and said I'd get the surprise of my life if I came to this spot."

"I don't believe it." Judith looked around the big room. "Nobody knew I was coming here with Noble."

"Somebody wanted me to find you. We parted last night under—well, strained circumstances. Remember?"

"Strained is right," she said. "Have you decided to stop trying to prove someone was murdered in my house. You'll never be able to convince me that Peter was murdered. It's just silly. I suppose the dog was murdered too."

Alec nodded. "Doctor Prentice talked to you about that, didn't he?"

"I asked him and he told me the truth. Naturally I wanted to know, having been part of the exhumation squad."

"He told you he killed it with a shot of morphine, didn't he?"

"What if he did? It's the truth, isn't it. Oh, Alec, here we go again. Do we have to keep snapping at each other every time we're together. Why don't you forget about murders, and bodies, and crazy lies—"

"Especially lies," Alec said grimly. "The dog did not die from an injection of morphine. It was poisoned by a chunk of meat."

"Alec!" She looked frightened. "Here I was, having such a good time. Then you come along and bring back all that unhappiness."

Alec was suddenly conscience stricken.

"Sure, I'm a lug and you're right," he apologized "The Dresden Room wasn't created for quarrels. It was made for romance. Okay! Let's romance."

He arose and she moved into his arms. They danced several numbers in a kind of rosy dream, each content with the other's close presence. Judith's eyes were shining again and she was completely happy. Alec could see that.

Someone tapped Alec on the shoulder and he looked around. It was Noble Sanborn. He was standing there, grinning foolishly and swaying just a bit. His breath would have caught fire if a spark had met those alcoholic fumes.

"Thanks, pal, for filling in. I'm okay now, but I never thought a man could get so dry."

"Beat it, cockroach!" Alec said. "Go back and crawl in the woodwork. You're tight."

"Half tight," Noble corrected. "But just tight enough to resent that."

Sanborn wobbled away and Alec continued to dance with Judith.

"You shouldn't have hurt his feelings," she said. "All he ever hopes for is an excuse to drink."

"He doesn't need an excuse," Alec said curtly. "He's got the instincts of a sponge."

"Stop it!" she said indignantly. "After all, he's my cousin and a member of my family." She stopped dancing abruptly. They were at the edge of the floor, near the table Alec had engaged. "Alec, take me back to our table. I want to tell you something."

They walked over and sat down. Alec ordered two drinks and canceled his dinner order. They waited until the drinks were served, sipped them a bit and looked at each other across the table. Under the soft lights, Judith was absolutely breath-taking in her blue dress, with her white shoulders, her glossy hair, her pretty face.

"Alec, I have a confession to make," she said slowly. "I can't keep up this pretense any longer. I must tell you the truth."

"What pretense?" Alec asked, taking out his case and lighting a cigarette.

"Give me a cigarette," said Judith suddenly. "I've been dying for one all evening and I forgot to bring mine along."

ALEC slowly presented his open case and she took one.

"I thought you never used 'em?" he said. She took one, lighted it from the match he presented and puffed bravely.

"That was a lie, just like all the rest of the lies I've been telling you. Alec, you've told me you cared for me. Has that anything to do with the investigation you have been making at the Ander house?"

"Certainly," he answered. "I want to protect you. I want to get you out of there."

"I thought so," she said. "Well, I'm tired of stringing you along, and I'm just beginning to realize that this little flirtation I've been having with you may make a lot of trouble for my father, and Uncle Jerome and all the rest. So I guess it would be best for both of us if we ended it here and now."

Alec eyed her gravely. "Flirtation? Is that

what you call it?"

Judith nodded again.

"Yes," the girl continued. "I'm not the shrinking violet that Dad would have you believe. I was until he sent me away to school with orders I was to be kept in strict seclusion. But my teachers didn't approve of that, so I went out whenever I pleased. I saw everything! Why, I've had dates with at least fifty fellows. I drink and I smoke and I've had plenty of fun, believe me. I'm madly in love with a man whom I intend to marry as soon as he gets his divorce."

HER words halted suddenly, stopped by the look in Alec's eyes.

"I don't believe it," he said.

"It's true," she insisted earnestly. "I don't really love you. I'm just a rich girl, amusing herself, passing the time away, while Tom is divorcing his present wife. I guess I'm crazy like all the Anders. We drink and murder people and sneak out of the house and do things on the sly that we oughtn't to—"

Alec reached across the table, took one of her hands in his and interrupted her.

"Judy!" he cried sharply. "Quit it. Do you think you're kidding me? You—a gay flame of the cabarets—you and your Tom! Gosh, what nonsense. Judy, you can't fool me. I know better. Such nonsense. It's pitiful."

In her chagrin she started to cry, but he only laughed at her. Then she caught his amused glance through her tears and started to laugh, too.

"Well, it sounded like a good plausible yarn to me while I was telling it, and I don't see why it didn't go over," she said, at last. "You can't say I didn't try." She looked at him earnestly. "Alec won't you stop pestering my family?"

"No." He shook his head. "Nor you either."

She glanced at her wrist watch.

"Alec, please hunt up Noble. It's time I was getting home."

"Never mind Noble," Alec said. "I'll take you home myself."

"No, he brought me to this place and I can't leave him here. He'll get pie-eyed if I do. Please go into the bar and find him."

"All right," he grumbled. "You get your wrap and wait for me near the check room."

He helped her up, then headed for the bar. It was a big bar, curving like a horseshoe and served by a dozen experts in mixing drinks.

Alec walked around it to the further side where there was a clump of ornamental palms in green buckets.

Behind these palms, Alec halted beside Noble, who was seated atop one of the high green leather-covered bar chairs. Both arms of the seated man were crooked on the bar and his head was on top of them. Arranged in front of him were eleven cocktail glasses, neatly arranged in pyramid form. Five on the bottom, then three, two and one on the very top. Each contained an olive. Just an olive.

"Come on, snap out of it," Alec ordered and shook him. "We're going home."

"Don' wanna go home. Ain't drunk 'nough yet. Man has to get very tight before he goes into that house. You better have some too, Alec, ol' boy."

Noble's words were slurred and thick. His eyes were glassy when he raised his head and grinned foolishly at Alec.

"You're drunk enough to stand anything —even that house," Alec said. "And you're coming along if I have to do a Kip Ander on you and sling you over my shoulder."

"I'll come quiet, officer," Noble shuddered. "Where's Judy?"

"Waiting for us. Come along."

Alec saw Judith wince as he hove into sight with Noble in tow. Noble was very, very drunk and didn't seem to care much who knew it. Alec piled him into a taxi with Judith, then got in himself.

There was very little conversation during the trip. Obviously, Noble wasn't too drunk to realize what a fool he had made of himself, and he kept his eyes averted from Judith. She sat with a frown on her brow.

Alec pondered their recent conversation, wondering how such a girl had ever thought up the story of many loves. It was just the sort of thing that an inexperienced girl would think up—lurid and ultra romantic. It had seemed to Alec that Judith knew more than to do that. But perhaps he had misjudged her.

The taxi covered the seven blocks in short order and turned into the street where the Ander home was located. Judith uttered a cry.

"Fire! Alec, the house is on fire!"

Alec thrust his head out of the cab window. Smoke was coming out the top floor windows.

"Driver," Alec cried. "Driver, stop. Judy, get out and run for the alarm box. Then come back to the cab. It will be parked across the street. Stay with Noble."

As Judith got out one side of the cab, Alec jumped out the other. He told the driver to pull up opposite the house and watch Noble. Then he rushed toward the house.

Death was busy again!

CHAPTER XII

Death on the Loose

WHEN Alec reached the iron grilled doorway, he found it locked. He put his finger on the bell and held it there.

Looking up, he could see the windows of the top floor turning a dull orange color. The fire was spreading. Smoke seemed to be thicker than ever. Now it was coming through the chinks in the window frame.

There was no answer to his insistent ringing. He got a toehold in the grille work and climbed over the gate. Reaching the door he banged on it and kicked it. Still, there was no answer and his apprehensions grew. This might be an attempt to wipe out the whole family.

He removed his dark gray fedora, wadded it around his fist, smashed a window, and cleared broken glass away. Somewhere in the distance he heard sirens. Judith had worked fast.

Alec climbed over the window sill and found himself in the big living room. He raced across it to the reception hall and went up the stairs three at a time. At the second floor he yelled as loud as he could and drew no answer. He flung open some doors. The rooms were empty.

He thought of Mrs. Ander, old and frail. He reached the third floor and shouted again, without result. He hurried to her room. The door was locked. Alec hesitated. Perhaps the fire could be put out in time so that she wouldn't be endangered. He decided to take a chance. Anyway, firemen could smash that door down easier than he'd be able to.

He rushed up the narrower, steeper steps to the fourth floor where Alfred Porter had his laboratory. The door was closed, but the big padlock wasn't fastened. He opened the door.

A cloud of yellow smoke came out to greet and engulf him. It brought tears to his eyes and choking coughs from his throat. But the smoke wasn't too thick to obscure a darker blob beside the lab bench.

Alec plunged inside the room. The flames were eating at the lab bench.

He knew some of the chemicals would be of the explosive type. He had to work very fast. Alfred Porter was lying there with his head and shoulders on the lab bench, probably knocked out by the explosion.

Alec seized his shoulders and screamed at him. The scream died on his lips. Porter's head was covered with blood. His face had the alarming grayness of death.

Heavy feet were pounding up the stairs. A window in the lab crashed in. The firemen were already at work. One fireman crawled through the window, dragging a length of hose.

Alec waited long enough to watch them attack the flames. He yelled for one fireman to stand guard over Alfred Porter's body. For it was a corpse. Alec had made sure of that.

Then he hurried down the steps as fast as he could. The fire was spreading rapidly. At any moment some of those chemicals might go off and the whole house be blown to bits.

On the third floor he paused, recalling Mrs. Ander's locked door. He summoned one of the firemen and explained about the locked door. The fireman had an ax and knew how to use it. The door splintered in less than a minute. The fireman reached through, turned the bolt and Alec pushed inside.

Mrs. Ander, fully dressed except for shoes and the white frilly neckpiece she always

[*Turn page*]

When the exclusive Everglades Club is mysteriously looted, Private Operative Bill Daugherty is called in to solve the confusing riddle—and to bag an elusive, vicious killer in

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wore, was stretched out on the bed. Alec's heart did a loop, until he saw her chest rising and falling rhythmically. He bent over her, slid two arms beneath her form and started to lift her. Then he grunted.

The odor that came from Mrs. Ander's mouth was no less virulent than that which Noble had emitted at the Dresden Room.

Mrs. Ander was drunk. Dead drunk!

For the first time, Alec noticed the open cabinet, the glass and a partly finished quart of bonded whisky. He kicked these objects under the bed.

"She must have passed out," he told the firemen. "I'll take care of her."

"Get her to the second floor," the firemen said. "This blaze won't spread much. The house is too well built for that and we'll confine it to the upper floors. She'll be safe enough."

ALEC carried her down the steps. She was no heavier than a large doll and she was so terribly drunk. Alec saw the door to Kip's room open and light coming from it. He hurried to it. If Kip was there, he could take care of his mother.

But it was Judith he found. Judith who stood at the entrance to the storage closet and was hauling out portraits which Kip stored there. She looked up and gave a cry of alarm.

"She's all right," Alec said. "I'll put her on the bed. Judy, she is okay. Don't go to pieces now. I thought you were a tough specimen."

"I am," she sobbed. "I am, Alec, but what happened to grandmother. She—she looks as if she is—is dead."

"She isn't," Alec said. "What the devil were you doing?"

"I was afraid Dad's pictures might be burned. These are the only ones he keeps and I had to try and save them, Alec. Grandmother is drunk, isn't she?"

"Plastered," Alec replied. "Dead drunk. Where is everybody?"

"I don't know. Alec, what's happened? What caused the fire? The pictures, we've got to get them out."

"Take it easy. There isn't much danger of the fire spreading. Take care of your grandmother. I'll stand by to rescue the portraits if the fire gets any worse."

Judith could do nothing with her grandmother. Only sleep would correct the effects of her drinking, but she was a little better, judging by the deep groans that sounded very incongruous coming from such a little woman.

Alec, playing safe, hauled out more portraits and stacked them near the window. He returned to the supply closet, dragged out several more and noticed that included among them was a nearly empty frame. Empty except for ragged edges, as if the canvas had been ruthlessly cut out with a sharp knife.

He recalled those burned bits in the furnace. They must have come from this frame. Casually, so that even Judith wouldn't notice, he put the empty frame against the wall with the others, but he took time enough to look it over.

Kip had a habit of dating his pictures with crayon marks on the frame. The empty one was dated 3/11/36. Alec made a mental note of that.

Firemen came down to report the fire out, but one of them blundered badly.

"We'll have to call the police on this. That guy upstairs is dead."

Judith looked up from beside the bed. Alec went to her at once.

"Who—is it?" she breathed.

"Alfred," he said softly. "Alfred Porter. I don't know what happened to him yet. I'd better go upstairs. The police will be here soon, so bring your grandmother out of it. Warn her to be careful what she says if that booze still has a grip on her. Use smelling salts, dump her into a cold tub if necessary, but wake her up."

"What about Noble? He's still outside in the taxi."

"Hang Noble. Let him stay there. The cabbie won't leave. He hasn't been paid yet. Remember now—wake her up and get a grip on yourself. If it helps any, I never lost one iota of all the love I've got for you. Be back soon."

Alec sped to the fourth floor. A deputy fire chief faced him. Alec produced his wallet.

"My name is Hart. I'm connected with the District Attorney's office and I'll take charge of things. Want to look at these papers?"

The deputy chief did and was satisfied.

"Doesn't amount to much, I'd say," he offered. "Looked the situation over pretty well. Why people will allow dumb clucks to keep stuff like this in a dwelling house is more than I can figure out. Lucky we got here. If some of those chemicals had exploded, the whole top of the house would have been blown off."

"What about him?" Alec pointed to the corpse.

THE fireman shrugged. "Here's how I figure it. That phony chemist was working on some experiment and jarred the bench. Notice that big two gallon brown bottle on the floor? It's full of sulphuric acid. I think it fell off the top shelf and landed on his head."

"It's possible," Alec said without much assurance in his voice. "That didn't cause the fire though."

"No, it didn't," the deputy chief agreed. "I'll show you what was responsible."

He led Alec over beside the body of young Porter. On one of the cabinet shelves was a can of ether, its cork loose. Below it and about two feet to the left, was a bunsen burner.

"I figure the brown bottle not only hit this man on the head, but it also knocked the can on its side. The cork loosened and ether began to drip out. Pretty soon the room was well-filled with ether fumes. The bunsen burner was lighted and, brother, that's some combination for trouble."

Alec studied the dead man's head. It had been badly lacerated by the heavy brown bottle.

"I don't think the blow killed him," he said.

"Neither do I," the deputy chief agreed. "The way I see it, he was knocked out, but still breathing. The explosion created plenty of heat. He breathed it in and seared his lungs. It happens lots of times when people rush into rooms full of fire."

"I'm going downstairs to telephone," Alec said. "Take charge until I get back, like a good fellow. Don't touch anything."

Alec sped down the steps again to the second floor, ran to the room where he had left Judith and her grandmother and tapped on the door. She called out and he identified himself. She unlocked the door and he stepped inside.

"How is she?"

"I'll have her awake in a little while—I hope. But Alfred—was he murdered?"

"On the surface of things it doesn't seem so," Alec said. "Can't tell for sure yet. Or do you think he was?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure of myself any more."

"Judy, for heaven's sake, if you know anything, speak up now. It will be too late when the cops get here."

"I know nothing. I'm just frightened. Are we all going to be killed, Alec?"

"You won't be," he assured her. "I'll see to that. Nothing to worry about right now anyway. The place is full of firemen. I'll stall all I can, but it won't be long, so work fast on the old lady."

Alec went to the first floor, moving much more slowly now. He wanted to give Judith a chance. If they discovered Mrs. Ander drunk, it was bound to leak out. Alec had suddenly found out that he didn't want to do this family any harm. It made no difference now how they had treated him. Judith was one of them and that meant everything to him.

Before he reached a telephone, Kip, Dr. Prentice, Jerome and Suzanne entered, out of breath and very excited. Alec had never before been so glad to see anyone. Their presence meant he was entitled to spend a few moments questioning them and give Judith a chance to sober up her grandmother.

"What's happened?" Kip yelled. "My mother—Judith? Alec, tell me what happened or, by heaven, I'll—bust you!"

"Your mother and Judith are all right. Perfectly safe. So is Noble. He's sleeping off a jag in a taxi out front. Incidentally, you'd better go see how he is, Doctor Prentice. And pay the driver like a good guy, will you?"

"I'll see to it," Prentice said and disappeared through the door. Alec led the rest of them into the library and closed the door.

"Sit down," Alec ordered. "I'm here on a new basis and it might as well be understood. First of all, where have you all been?"

"To see District Attorney Crowley," Kip said. "Someone phoned us, said he was Crowley and we were to come to his office at nine-thirty. If he wasn't there, we were to wait. He warned us if we disobeyed, he'd send police."

"What did Crowley want?" Alec demanded.

"He never showed up. He never made that phone call either. We telephoned his home after waiting more than an hour. I—may have got you in wrong, Alec. I—told him you were around pestering us and I thought you had used his name to intimidate us, drag us to the office and make us talk. Crowley was sore."

"Good and sore!" Jerome put in. "And that's a mild way of saying it."

"Well, it can't be helped now. Were all four of you together every moment while you waited for Crowley to appear?"

"Wait a minute," Kip said harshly—the old Kip again, with a chip on each shoulder. "What are you inferring now?"

"Nothing yet. I asked a question and I expect an answer—at once. Believe me, I

ask questions much more politely than detectives."

"We were not together," Jerome said mildly. "No two members of this family agree on anything. When we got sick of waiting, Kip went for a drink. Doctor Prentice had a case across town. I sat on those marble steps in the building where Crowley has his offices until my legs got cramped so I took a walk. Suzanne stayed there waiting."

Suzanne, at the mention of her name, began to wring her hands and rock slowly from side to side.

"Something evil has happened again. I know it. Something has happened."

"You migbt as well hear it from me," Alec said. "Alfred Porter is dead!"

CHAPTER XIII

Jim Crowley Takes Over

FOR a moment there was silence. Then Jerome swore and flung his hat into a chair. Suzanne sat down and sobbed quietly. Kip just stared until Alec snapped him out of it.

"I can't say it was murder, but I can't say it wasn't either. It looks like an accident. A combination of careless moves on Alfred's part. A heavy bottle insecurely placed on the top shelf. It slid off, upset a can of ether which spilled out. The bottle also hit Alfred on the head and knocked him senseless. The ether fumes got thicker. There was a bunsen burner going and—an explosion, naturally. I don't know whether the blow from the bottle killed him or if he inhaled scorching fumes or—if he was murdered. That's a job for the medical examiner to determine and I've got to phone at once."

Alec called Police Headquarters first and luckily found Nolan there.

"I had a hunch," Nolan explained. "In more hot water, Alec?"

"No, but a lot of other people are. Get over to the Ander house right away."

"Another one?" Nolan asked.

"Yes, and I need a man who knows what to look for. Hurry, Erf."

Alec hung up for a moment and then dialed District Attorney Crowley's residence. He braced himself. Crowley was going to be difficult to handle. He might yank Alec off the case at once, despite the new developments. Alec had to take the chance, but no matter what happened, he wasn't going into seclusion.

He was thinking about Judith as he dialed. She had confessed that her stories at the Dresden Room were fabricated out of thin air. He knew why she had told those stories. Who had summoned Alec to the hotel? And why? Just so that he'd run across Judith and discover she was a liar? What would be the motive in that?

He thought about Mrs. Ander too. The charming, sweet and delicate little lady who automatically produced chivalry in any man she encountered. Now it seemed her charming manner was a smoke screen to hide heavy drinking.

Was, Alec asked himself, the whole Ander family crazy?

Then Crowley was on the wire, burning Alec's eardrums with condemnation. It wasn't until he became short of breath that Alec was able to get in a word and he had to talk fast.

"Another killing, Mr. Crowley. Another death at the Ander home. Now do you blame me for staying on the job?"

"Another one?" Crowley gasped. "Now listen to me, Alec. Don't touch a thing. You've bungled badly and I'm taking charge from here on. I shall get there as quickly as possible."

Alec hung up and turned to face Jerome, Kip and Suzanne. They were obviously worried. Alec hardly blamed them.

"You got your wish, Kip. Crowley has taken over this matter and he will assume charge. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"I'm a fool," Kip berated himself. "Alec, none of us have appreciated the way you've handled things. I can't blame you for thinking there was murder committed. Frankly, that isn't so, but at least you tried to help us. Crowley will probably slap the whole bunch of us in jail."

"I doubt it." Alec sat down. "Crowley is a highly impressionable man. He is swayed by your political power, your social standing and the money you represent. Also, if Peter's death seemed to be accidental, then Alfred's is doubly so."

"I'd better get the family lawyer over here." Kip started to arise.

"I wouldn't," Alec said quickly. "Don't give Crowley a chance even to think you are on the defensive. You have alibis—of sorts. All but your mother and no one is going to suspect her. Noble was at the Dresden Room with Judith and I was there too, so they are well alibied."

Kip slowly settled back into his chair.

His hands curled around the arms of it and gripped hard.

"Noble and Judith went out together?" he asked in a studied voice. "It wasn't just some rigamarole so she could meet you, Alec?"

"No. I received an anonymous phone call telling me to go to the Dresden Room. I was intrigued and went. I found Judith and Noble. He promptly proceeded to get boiled. Now if you're thinking of punishing Judith for this, you ought to lay off."

"Judith knows what she is doing," Kip said. "It's that little rat I'm worried about. So help me, if that drunkard bothers her again, I'll kill him."

"Harsh words," Alec shrugged. "Very harsh. Dangerous too, if anything should happen to Noble. And it may. Two members of this family have already died. There could be a third. Kip, I want to talk to you alone. Come into the hall."

ALEC dropped his voice after Kip closed the door behind them.

"Kip, your mother is in your room upstairs. She's drunk. Judith is trying to bring her out of it, but perhaps you'd better go up too."

Kip's massive shoulders drooped. "I thought she was. When we got that call to proceed to Crowley's office, I tried to awaken her and couldn't. Yes, I knew she drank, but lately she's getting like Noble. Do you want a piece of advice, young fellow?"

"I'll listen, if that's what you mean," Alec said.

"I ask nothing more. Drop Judith. Do it without breaking her heart if you can, but drop her. Marrying into this family is like joining a cult of lunatics. I'm Judith's father and I love her very much, even if I don't exactly make a show of that fact. But I'm thinking of you too."

"Ah!" Alec said. "But my intentions are to take her out of here. You'll have to get another saint to pose for your pictures. And I don't intend that a lot of the Ander money follow Judith either, contrary to what a lot of people will think."

"I'd better see to mother," Kip said abruptly. "I'd—uh, look at that mess."

Dr. Prentice came in. He was half carrying Noble into the house. Kip walked over and took Noble away from Dr. Prentice. He swept the drunken man off his feet and carried him up the stairs. Dr. Prentice followed.

In the bedroom, Prentice mopped his forehead.

"That boy is getting worse. He gave me quite a tussle out there. The taxi driver said something about a death."

"Alfred Porter," Alec said. "He's in the lab. Look at him if you wish. I'd like your opinion. Don't move him though. Crowley is on his way and from the way he spoke, he intends to burn up this house all over again.

Dr. Prentice lighted a cigarette. His hands were very steady. Too steady, Alec thought.

"Was it—murder?" Prentice asked.

"I don't know, but I wouldn't bet a great deal it wasn't. Incidentally, doctor, don't leave the house after Crowley goes. I want to talk to you and every other member of this family."

"As you wish."

"Doc, how long has Mrs. Ander been drinking herself into a coma?"

Prentice looked at Alec in silence for a moment. Then he blew smoke from his lips and studied the tip of his cigarette.

"So you know that too. Quite an observing young man, aren't you? I'll be frank. Mrs. Ander has always used alcohol. Wisely and not too much, until lately."

"What do you mean by lately?"

"About the last couple of weeks. I'll look in on her. She's drunk now, isn't she?"

"Petrified," Alec said. "Wake her up before Crowley gets here. He just won't speak to people who drink too much. That's Crowley!"

A flourish of drums should have accompanied Crowley's entrance. He swept through the door followed by four detectives. He saw Alec and walked over to him.

"Where is this corpse? What happened—in detail? If it is murder, I shall take all the necessary steps. Meanwhile, consider yourself suspended."

"But why?" Alec objected. "I only reported this death to you."

"Undoubtedly you are in some way connected with it. The facts, man. This is important. We're dealing with important people."

"Judith—the girl in the family—her cousin, Noble, and I were dancing at the Dresden Room," Alec explained. "We returned home and the top floor of the house was on fire. I broke in while Judith sent an alarm. There is an amateur chemical laboratory on the top floor, used by Alfred Porter who is also a member of this household. I found him dead."

"Yes? Very good work if it's the truth. What did this man you call Noble do to aid? I didn't hear you mention him."

"Noble got himself drunk. He wasn't able to do very much. Do you want me upstairs, sir?"

CROWLEY frowned his disapproval.

"I'd rather you did not accompany me. I have brought along some of the most capable detectives on the force. Wait here. I'll return and tell you whether or not it is murder."

"Mister," Alec told Crowley's retreating back as it stalked up the staircase, "you couldn't determine black from white without a color chart."

"But he's the boss and you're nothing but a pipsqueak of an assistant," Sergeant Nolan's voice remarked with a chuckle.

"Erf," Alec turned and grabbed Sergeant Nolan by the arm. "Am I glad to see you! Come into the library. If anybody is there, I'll chase them out. Man alive, things do pop in this house."

"Um—I should say so," Nolan said dryly. "Pretty soon there won't be anybody left."

In the privacy of the library, Alec offered Nolan a cigarette and sat down on the edge of the desk.

"This time it's young Porter," he explained. "The one with the big glasses and the retiring manner."

"I remember him," Nolan grunted. "Anybody in this family who is retiring becomes something to remember in my mind. How'd he die?"

"It looks like an accident. A beautiful accident, but the set-up is too good. The murdered intended to let the whole house burn down if necessary. He took care that all the other members of the family were safely outside the building though. At least he thought they were all safe."

"And just what do you want me to do, Alec?"

"After Crowley gets through upstairs, I want you to have a look. Maybe those detectives with him will spot everything and then again, they may not. Crowley is going to make a snap judgment and say it was an accident. The detectives may back him up."

"Let's hope," Nolan declared. "I've been working on Doc Prentice. I might as well have gone to the movies."

"Nothing, eh?"

"Not a blasted thing. The doc is a hard-working, amibitious sort. He doesn't sponge on the family. Earns his keep by taking care of the old lady. He's got a downtown office and is very busy. He has a good reputation too. The kind of a doctor I'd like for my own family. Imagine, he's been practicing for eleven years now and he still studies."

"Do you mean summer courses?"

"Sure, and besides, he bought himself a cadaver. A stiff in layman's language. He works on this, studying anatomy all over again. I say a successful doctor who does this is interested in his work and his patients."

Alec slowly lowered his cigarette from between his lips.

"Erf, just where does he do this anatomy? I mean, where is the lab?"

"At City Hospital. They let doctors use some of the rooms on the top floor for things like that."

"How long has he been working on this body, Erf?"

"Gosh, I didn't ask. What difference does it make?"

"You got a car handy? One we can use in a hurry?"

"Sure, there's a department cruiser just outside. What are you driving at?"

"Suppose," Alec said, "that you had a corpse to dispose of. One you wanted to disappear entirely. Suppose you were a doctor who knew about private rooms lent to doctors who supplied themselves with a cadaver for brushing up on anatomy. Don't you get it, Erf? For Pete's sake, are you as dumb as that?"

"Jumping jitters!" Nolan's eyes opened wide. "Maybe you're right. Let's go find out. Let's—hey, wait. If we do find there's enough of the cadaver left so we can recognize the guy, then what? We don't even know who we're looking for."

"All right. But if the corpse on Doc Prentice's anatomy table has a bullet wound, it ought to prove something."

"Come on!" Nolan cried. "That's hot stuff!"

CHAPTER XIV

A Corpse for Convenience

NEAR the door, on the way out, Alec saw Jerome and told him he'd be back soon, in case Crowley wanted him. Then he joined Nolan and they hurried to where the police car was parked. Nolan piloted it to City Hospital clear across town.

A flash of Nolan's badge and they were on an elevator, being raised quickly to the top floor. A hospital official accompanied them. Alec

told him nothing.

They entered a medium-sized room containing an old operating table and a smaller table lined with instruments. Books and notes were strewn on top of a desk. The anatomy table was bare.

"Where is the body Doctor Prentice is working on?" Alec demanded.

"I'll have it brought," the hospital official said. "This is clearly against regulations, but I won't argue with a badge."

"Especially a gold one like mine," Nolan grunted. "Go on—bring that corpse in here. And why was it moved anyhow?"

The hospital official snickered. "A study of gross anatomy, as Doctor Prentice is performing, takes weeks, sometimes months. The keeping qualities of the human body after death are poor."

"Yeah, don't go into detail." Nolan curled his nose. "Just bring it in here."

"Why don't you come with me to our refrigerating plant? It will be quicker and easier."

"Thanks," Alec said. "We are in a hurry."

Some minutes later, shivering slightly from a combination of lowered temperature and the sight of several sheeted forms, Alec and Nolan looked down upon the body of a man who was about fifty or fifty-five years old. His hair was a mixture of light brown and gray. The face seemed to be chiseled of granite.

"Can you tell me whether or not this man was shot through the chest?" Alec asked the hospital official.

"Perhaps. I—no. No, I can't. You see, after stripping off the sheet, I find that Doctor Prentice began his work on the chest. Any wound there would have been obliterated."

Although Sergeant Nolan was an old hand hand at this, he suddenly developed a strange squeamishness.

"Excuse me," he said. "This is too much for me."

Abruptly he left the room.

"Suppose," Alec said to the official, "we talk it over somewhere else. I don't especially care for these surroundings."

"Most people don't. We can go back to Doctor Prentice's anatomy room."

Alec felt better in the cold, formal and yet far more cheerful quarters.

"I think you said your name is Markham. Mr. Markham—or is it doctor?"

"I am not a physician. Tell me, are you suspecting Doctor Prentice of some crime?"

"Why do you ask?" Alec countered.

"Well, I'd say you were wasting your time. Prentice is a good man in every respect. Very ethical. His work, his reputation and his honor are beyond question."

"He's probably innocently involved," Alec said. "Don't call him up and say we've been here. You might give the whole thing away and permit a murderer to go free."

"I shall be most discreet. Especially since I don't like getting mixed up with the police."

"Tell me how arrangements are made to acquire a cadaver for this—er—post-graduate work."

"It's quite simple. For a certain fee—about sixty dollars—a cadaver will be provided by hospitals or prisons."

"How is the cadaver delivered, Mr. Markham?"

"Well, it certainly does not walk here. The usual method is for a mortician to bring it, in a hearse, to our receiving entrance. It is placed on an elevator and carried up here. That's quite all, Mr. Hart."

"Nobody checks it in?"

"Why, no. The doctor makes all his own arrangements."

"All right, sir," Alec said. "You've been most helpful and, I trust, you will be secretive about our interview too. As soon as I find my detective sergeant, we'll be on our way."

AT THIS moment Nolan returned and indicated he was ready to depart.

"Nice cheerful place, that," Nolan said, when they reached the street. "But there's too many corpses in the refrigerator to suit me. If I had a glass of whisky now, I'd drink it warm. You finished, Alec?"

"All done. Let's go back to the house."

On the way Nolan related his reasons for that brief disappearance at the hospital.

"I prowled around until I found an inking pad and some paper. Then I slipped back into the ice box and took the fingerprints of that corpse, making sure nobody saw me. These days fingerprints usually tell a good story. Many more people than ever before have them on file."

"That's why I wanted you along," Alec confessed. "You think of details. Fingerprints never occurred to me. Now drop me at the Ander house, go to your office and see about those prints. If you find anything, come right over."

Crowley was waiting for him when he walked in. Seated in the chair, in which Alec suspected a man had died, Crowley glowered at him.

"Where have you been, Alec?" he complained. "I have been waiting for you at least

half an hour."

"Sorry, sir. I went out for a few minutes. I thought you'd be busy for some time upstairs."

"Doing what? The evidence is all there. It was an accident. Oh, I admit two accidental deaths in such a short space of time and in the same family is almost too coincidental to believe. It has happened before, however."

"So it's accidental," Alec nodded. "The deputy fire chief seemed to think so too."

"What do you think about it then? I can tell you are still wanting us to find it was murder."

"Mr. Crowley, if it is murder, I hate to consider the consequences. I suppose you also want to know why I disobeyed your orders about not molesting the Ander family."

"I do indeed. I'm half tempted to accept the resignation you offered."

"You may have it, sir. I would like you to know just why I disobeyed though. Did you see Judith Ander?"

"A very pretty and charming girl. I—Alec, you sly devil. I see now. You were snooping around so you might keep in touch with the girl. Of course that's it. I don't blame you, but you might have explained."

"Well," Alec fidgeted with one foot, drawing lines on the rug, "young love. You know, sir."

"Indeed. You are forgiven. Frankly, if one of my assistants—one I like and have a great deal of faith in—should merge with the Ander family, I'd be proud. Very proud and happy, Alec."

"Thank you, sir," Alec said cheerfully. "You are finished here, then? The matter is closed as far as you're concerned?"

"It is. The medical examiner has been here and gone. His opinion agrees with mine. Accidental death. Primary cause, inhalation of flames. Forget about murder. You young fellows think the District Attorney's office functions for no other reason than to solve murder mysteries. Good night, Alec. Best of luck with your romance."

He arose, dug Alec with one elbow and winked. Then he stuck a cigar in his mouth and walked out. Alec dropped into one of the chairs and breathed normally again for the first time in several minutes.

Jerome came in a few minutes later and sat down too. Alec noticed he avoided the murder chair.

"This is the devil of a family," Jerome opined. "Your boss said it was death by accident. Did you know that?"

"From his own lips," Alec replied. "What do you think?"

Jerome shrugged.

"Who am I to puzzle a thing like this out?" he asked. "If they say it was an accident, that settles it. I didn't even go near the lab. Crowley talked to Mrs. Ander. She held up fairly well, but the old lady certainly was spiffed. Too bad. She never used to be like that."

"Until when?"

"Why, a few weeks ago, I think. None of us ever were teetotalers, but we know how to handle it. Now she's off and so is Noble. He's stiff in his bedroom. Something must be done about that boy."

"What he needs is a job—some good, hard, dirty work," Alec said. "Was it always like this? Bickering, confusion, drinking?"

JEROME shook his head. "No. I'd say the family went to pieces when my brother died. As you know, he was Mrs. Ander's husband. That was in Nineteen Thirty-Seven."

"When?" Alec asked quickly, his memory going back to that crayoned date on Kip's picture frame.

"Nineteen Thirty-Seven — the middle of February. What's so exciting about that date?"

"Nothing. He left a great deal of money, didn't he?"

"A few millions. We're very well off. He stipulated that we should all be well-cared for. There's enough for us all too."

Alec rubbed his chin and wondered if this was the proper moment to explode his facts in front of the family. Perhaps the psychological results of Alfred Porter's death would break them down. A chance like this might never arise again.

Alec arose and walked the floor with slow paces. Now and then he glanced at Jerome. The man seemed entirely at his ease. Alec stopped walking and faced him.

"Jerome, will you be good enough to explain Alfred Porter's family connection?" he said.

"He is my—was my nephew. His mother was my sister."

"When did Alfred's mother—your sister—die?"

"Why, very shortly after Paul went. Two months—about."

"And her husband — Alfred's father? What happened to him?"

"Dead," Jerome said briefly. "I'm sick of answering questions. Kip is with his mother. He wanted me to relieve him."

"Just stay here a few minutes more," Alec said. "That's an order. Was Alfred's father named Nick Norris?"

"Are you crazy? Alfred's father was named Porter. What the devil is this all about?"

"Mostly murder," Alec said. "All right, his family name was Porter. What was his first name?"

Jerome bit his lip until he noticed that Alec was regarding him closely. He yawned, raised his arms and stretched. Alec knew the symptoms. Jerome was stalling for time. Time to think, to fashion his reply. To weigh the words and determine whether or not to tell the truth. Alec had seen witnesses do the same thing in court, perhaps not so openly, but they dilly-dallied. When that happened, Alec knew he had the upper hand.

"Come on, Jerome! Quit hesitating. I asked you a very simple, innocent question. I want the first name of Alfred's father."

Jerome grinned, but there was no mirth in it. He was rapidly reaching the end of his rope and he knew it.

"Suppose I don't care to discuss my family any further. What will you do about it, Alec? Arrest me, perhaps?"

"Perhaps. It might do you some good. Don't make me do it, Jerome."

Jerome chuckled.

"What headlines! Millionaire arrested because he refuses to give first name of a relative to a petty official from the District Attorney's office. I wonder how Crowley would like that."

"Right now I'm not worried about Crowley," Alec said seriously. "I want that name —although I could probably give it to you. Are you going to tell me?"

"No, I think not. On general principles. I don't like being pushed around, Alec. Arrest me if you like—if you think you can make such a phony accusation stick. I'm no lawyer, but I'm sure I have a right to some privacy."

"Stay right where you are. I'm going to use the telephone. If you try to leave this room, so help me, I'll slug you. Or better yet, I'll lock us both in together."

Alec went to the door and turned the key, removed it and put it into his pocket. When he turned about, Jerome was right behind him and all the aggressiveness that Kip had ever displayed was duplicated on his face.

"Wanna fight?" Alec asked cheerfully. "Sit down and stop being silly. If you want something to think about—study this."

Alec's hand came out of his pocket holding the pistol which had been rescued from the sewer at the corner. He held it up so Jerome could see it, recognize it, and he thought the man's eyes would pop out of his head. Jerome opened his mouth, tried to say something, but he was speechless. Alec left him there, dull-eyed with all the aggressiveness gone.

CHAPTER XV

Too Many Suspects

GOING to the phone, Alec called Police Headquarters and asked for Nolan.

"What about those prints?" he demanded.

"I was intending to take a run over," Nolan said. "They were on file all right. Those prints belong to a mug named Nick Norris. He was sent to the pen seven or eight years ago on a charge of bigamy. Seems he liked to marry wealthy women."

"When was he released?" Alec asked. His wits were beginning to spin. He really had something here and it portended little good for the Ander family. He had a motive and an identification.

"He was such an incorrigible in prison that they kept him in for his whole term. It expired three weeks ago and he hasn't been heard from since. Until we met him in that icebox."

"Thanks, Erf," Alec said. "Come over in about an hour. I may have a customer. His name might even be Ander. Yes—Jerome Ander."

Alec hung up, his eyes still on Jerome who had given absolutely no response when his name was mentioned in connection with an arrest. Alec almost found himself feeling sorry for this man.

"How about it, Jerome?" he asked. "Do I get Porter's first name now?"

"It was—Nick. Nick Porter. I—where did you get that gun?"

Alec had produced the gun and began to fiddle with it.

"From a sewer at the corner. Why, Jerome, you ought to know. You dropped it there. You also disposed of the extra cartridges by hiding them in an old paper carton outside. I also went to the Police Ballistics Department and they did some testing for me."

"You—did?" Jerome asked vaguely.

"Yes. Sit down because the rest of what I have to tell you may knock you off your

feet. There isn't any use feeling secure because you believe that even though the murder weapon has been found, the bullet hasn't. Frankly, I found the bullet the first day I came here. It was lodged in that chair. The one Nick Norris, alias Nick Porter, occupied when he died."

"No—no, that's a lie."

"I can show the bullet to you. Also the spot where it slashed through the leather upholstery. Why did you think I persisted in calling Peter's death a murder? Because I located the bullet. Blood seeped through the slash in the leather too. Nick's blood. Come over here and I'll show you."

Jerome sat down instead.

"What's the use? I know only too well you're not lying. I sensed, long ago, that you had something which drove you on. At first I felt sure it was Judith, but a girl doesn't create such persistency."

"Judith does—in me." Alec thought of her and shuddered. He hated what he had to do. What he had to say next.

"Why did you shoot Nick Norris, Jerome?"

Jerome Ander stared at Alec as if astounded. Then he burst into a fit of derisive laughter.

"That's rich," he said. "So you've been thinking I'm a murderer?" He sobered suddenly. "But I'm not. I didn't kill him. I've been a fool about a lot of things, but I'm not a murderer."

"It was your gun," Alec said.

Jerome again laughed harshly.

"I'm not talking. You can't prove these things. You merely guessed well, basing your guessing game on the bullet you found in the chair. I even have doubts about that."

"Have a look," Alec invited. "I made the slit a little bigger, but if you pull some of the upholstery free, you'll see it's bloodstained. The body remained in the chair for some time. After its removal the chair was carefully washed, but the slit wasn't noticed."

WITH an angry glance, Jerome went over to the chair. He finished his inspection of it quickly.

"That slit could have been done purposely to frighten me. I don't scare easily, Alec."

"Do you wish to see the written report of the Police firearms expert? Shall I show you charts—enlargements of the spent bullet that killed Nick Norris? Then an enlargement of another bullet fired through the same barrel? Jerome, you were seen getting rid of the gun. It killed Norris, beyond any doubt whatsoever. We have the numbers on the gun."

"It was my gun. It did kill Norris. I admit it."

Jerome spoke softly, almost as if to himself. Alec walked closer to hear better.

"Did you kill him?"

"No. You won't believe me, but I did not kill him. I would have liked to though. I wish I had. I could face things better than—than . . . ."

"Who? Who did it?"

"I don't know, but I'm feeling sorry for whoever did. Norris deserved killing."

"Keep your sympathy," Alec advised. "Because the person who killed Norris also murdered Peter and, I'm sure, young Porter. Do you want to tell me the whole story?"

Jerome hung his head. His eyes watched Alec and his voice was husky when he spoke.

"I might as well. We have to go back some years. Alfred was the son of Nick Norris, alias Porter. I think Porter was his right name. It doesn't matter. I'll call him Norris however. Alfred's mother fell in love with him. She wasn't especially young and she fell hard. None of us approved of him very much.

"They were married however. That was many years ago. You can't convince a woman in love that her sweetheart is anything but Sir Galahad. Very soon after, we learned the truth—that Norris had married my sister only for the money he could get out of her."

"Wasn't there enough—among all those millions—to satisfy him?" Alec queried.

"We never found out. Norris was kicked out when Alfred was about twelve. Later, we learned he had married two other women, using the name of Norris. Naturally we started divorce proceedings in the name of my sister. Paul died, however, and delayed things. Then, before any action could be taken, my sister also died."

"I'm beginning to see," Alec said slowly. "There was the matter of your brother Paul's estate. Norris, as your sister's widower, had a claim on it."

"He had a stranglehold on it," Jerome grunted and his voice rose in anger as he proceeded. "Let me explain. Before Paul died, he changed his will. He felt terribly sorry for Alfred's mother because he alone had favored Norris. Well, Alfred's mother was given one-third of the estate."

Alec whistled softly.

"Whew! Norris could certainly have cashed in."

"He intended to. His marriage to my sister was strictly legal. His first marriage. When she died before she could divorce him, he

became her heir because she died intestate."

"But why murder him?" Alec asked.

"I told you I did not kill him and I don't know who did. One of us—yes, I'll concede that, but hear me out before you make accusations."

"That was a matter-of-fact accusation pertaining to no one in particular. Go on, Jerome."

"The estate was, and is, largely composed of stock. The family owns the controlling interest in a number of businesses, but barely a controlling interest and we have refused to sell out. If Norris got one-third of this stock, he would have been in a position to either make us pay or take some handsome profits from people who don't like our control."

"In other words," Alec said, "Norris held the whip hand. His say-so might have ruined the family financially. That is—his share could have taken several millions away from you."

"We'd have been forced to sell and at a terrific loss," Jerome continued. "We're not beloved people, Alec. We're cruel people in business dealings and we have enemies waiting to knock us down. Therefore, Norris died."

"Tell me just what occurred," Alec urged.

"Norris knew nothing of the estate that was his and we didn't mean to tell him. He went to prison and stayed there a long time. We had a small hand in that although Norris cooperated splendidly by being a recalcitrant prisoner. When he got out, he went to see Peter."

"That I know," Alec told him.

JEROME'S eyebrows lifted.

"You really did some good detective work then. At any rate, Peter gave him little or no satisfaction beyond a promise of a reasonable amount of money, but Norris was, in spite of all his other failings, no fool. He investigated and learned the truth."

"Then he called at the house and made his demands. Is that it?"

"Precisely. A very nasty man too. Didn't give a tinker's dam about his son Alfred. Didn't even want to see him, luckily for us. We'd kept the truth from Alfred."

"And now," Alec leaned forward, "we come to the murder."

"Yes—the murder and all its harrowing consequences. If a whole family ever went slowly, stark, raving mad, we did. Peter jumped the gun on us, that's all. We had it out that night. All of us were there except Judith, who was expected home from school. Norris made his threats and meant to carry them out. There was nothing we could do about it—or so we thought. All but one of us, that is. The murderer knew what would stop Norris."

"You were not present then, when he was shot?"

"No. We left Norris in this room, seated in that chair. He was finishing a drink and he was hanged if he'd move. We just walked out on him and intended to hold a conference upstairs. After awhile, I went to my room. I don't know exactly where the rest of them were. Except Noble. He took the car and went to the station after Judith. We didn't want her to walk in on Norris."

"You heard the shot fired?" Alec asked.

"I didn't. The others said they didn't either. We assembled again upstairs. Our meeting lasted only a short time and then we went back to the library. Norris was in the chair—dead."

"Your automatic pistol was the weapon which was used to kill Norris," Alec said. "If you didn't use it to kill him, who did?"

Jerome's forehead became creased with perplexity and solicitude.

"I don't know," he said. "I kept the gun on the closet shelf in my room but I had not touched it for years. After the murder, I picked it up and hid it." He spread his hands in appeal. "That's the truth, Alec, whether you believe it or not."

"Can you prove alibis?" Alec asked. "They might not hold up, brothers and sisters and grandchildren, alibiing one another, but it would help."

"Doctor Prentice returned home right after we found Norris. He examined the body and said Norris had been dead about forty-five minutes. Checking back we discovered that all of us were in our rooms at the time. Or we were supposed to be."

"Who did you think it was?" Alec persisted. "You must have had some personal idea."

"Peter. The instant I heard he'd gone mad, I reasoned that he was the murderer and he could not stand the pangs of his own conscience."

"Peter was murdered," Alec said softly. "He knew the killer and was himself murdered so he'd never talk."

"Whatever happened," Jerome said, "we were all driven to heavy drinking, silent contemplation and everlasting fear. We are all mutually guilty of one thing. Concealing a crime."

"And skilfully too," Alec conceded, wondering how he could ever break this to

Judith. "I found Norris' body a short time ago."

"Then it's all over with. You can toss the lot of us into jail and have good and sufficient reason for doing so. Personally I'm glad. I've been afraid of following in Peter's footsteps sooner or later."

THIS suggestion brought a quick denial from Alec.

"I'm not going to throw you in jail," he said. "Why I'm practically a member of the family. No, my job is to find the actual murderer. He deserves no sympathy because he not only killed Norris, but he murdered Peter and Alfred in cold blood."

"You're probably right," Jerome agreed. "I always did think Peter, if he wasn't the murderer himself, knew who the killer was. He may have surprised him. I'm grateful, Alec—we all are—for your kindness. We don't deserve it after the way we treated you."

"I can forget that," Alec said.

There was a discreet knock on the door. Alec opened it and Sergeant Nolan stood there. He came in when Alec stepped aside.

"Erf, we've come close to the finish," Alec said. "I know why Norris was killed, when and where. I don't, however, know who did it beyond the fact that it must have been some member of this family."

"They're a pack of liars," Nolan warned. "You'll never get the right one to admit it."

"Perhaps not, but if I don't, I'll find him by other means. Erf, I want you to take Jerome upstairs to Peter's room. Lock the door and keep him there. Later on, I'll send some of the others. They are not to talk to one another about the case. Not one single word. The person who does talk goes into a cell. Understand that, Jerome?"

"I'm agreeable. I see what's behind it too. You're going to talk to each of us and try to get conflicting stories. You won't, Alec. We went over it a dozen times and always with the same result."

"Go with Nolan," Alec told him. "Cooperate a little while longer and we'll remove this menace. I intend to find him and no matter who it turns out to be, I shall have no mercy."

"Not even with Judith?" Jerome ventured.

"Not even with her. If she is a murderess, I'll take her by the hand and jump in the North River. That's how certain I am that she has nothing to do with it. Okay, Erf, you can take him away."

As Jerome turned away, Alec asked one more question.

"About Judith—did she have any inkling of what happened?"

"Neither she nor Alfred did," Jerome replied. "We were very careful about that."

CHAPTER XVI

Closing Net

DELAYING for several minutes, Alec fixed the details of Jerome's story very firmly in his brain. Then he went upstairs himself. Judith was with Mrs. Ander. Kip was there too. Judith came out to meet him. She took his arm, held it very tightly and they walked to the head of the stairs.

Almost automatically, they sat down on the top step. Judith said nothing for a moment or two.

"Alec, why didn't you believe that story I told you at the Dresden Room?"

Alec put his arm about her shoulders.

"It was too complete, Judy. No girl would ever confess to as much as you did."

"I was trying my best to make you forget me and my family." She looked at him, eyes speculative. "Are you going to cut me out, Alec, after you prove one of my relatives is a murderer?"

"What for?" he bristled. "Look here, my lady, I'm in love with you, not your relatives. And I always did say I'd never marry my wife's family too. We'll clean this up and get out of here."

"But you'll be the prosecutor. How can we get married?"

"As of the moment I turn a killer over to the police, I'm not on the District Attorney's staff. After all, I'm a lawyer. They can't disbar me. Now suppose you go back to your grandmother and tell your father I want to see him."

"Alec!" she said. She jumped to her feet with flashing eyes. "Oh!"

"Now don't get silly ideas into your head," he insisted. "I haven't a shred of proof that your father is guilty. Frankly, I don't believe he is. Send him out and stop worrying."

"I'll send him, but I'll worry too."

Judith backed away, turned abruptly and ran down the corridor. In a few seconds Kip came out of the room, swinging along belligerently.

"I'm not wasting any time on you," he said. "What do you want?"

"You can explain here—where the others will hear you, including a detective—or come with me to the library where we'll be alone. I want to know why you burned an oil portrait of Nick Norris alias Nick Porter."

"I'll go to the library with you," Kip said quickly and in a lowered voice. "You've been getting around, Alec."

After they had entered the library, Alec locked the door.

"Judith tells me you have asked her to marry you." Kip seemed entirely at ease when he established himself in one of the library chairs.

"You're not going to try to stop me?" Alec asked.

"No, I think not. Don't see how I could anyway. I also understand that Judith cheated somewhat. She disobeyed my instructions when she was away at school."

"Did you expect her to be a ninny all her life?" Alec demanded. "Just so she could pose for your sappy pictures? Which brings us directly to the matter of the canvas burned in the furnace and the empty portrait frame, dated the time of Nick Norris' visit to this house. I know all about Norris."

"I painted Norris—or Porter—or whatever you want to call him. I could tell, as the oils took shape on the canvas, that he was a rat. Then—when I knew certain things were in danger of discovery, I decided to destroy the painting."

"You didn't destroy the subject of the painting too?" Alec asked, mindful of the fact that Kip knew nothing about the proof of murder or the finding of Norris' body.

"Do you mean Norris, personally?" Kip said with a laugh. "Tell me, how in the world did you ever uncover him?"

"By drawing down a sheet in the refrigerating plant of a hospital anatomy room. Where Doctor Prentice brought Norris' body."

KIP'S easy smile died. He sat bolt upright in the chair.

"So it's like that," he said slowly.

"Just like that, Kip. Norris was murdered in this room. I even know why. Because he possessed the legal right to destroy the financial empire this family represents. A right he would have exerted too, because he hated all of you."

"I didn't kill him," Kip said. "Maybe I would have if someone else hadn't beat me to it."

"Do you know who did?"

"No. I've tried to guess, but it was impossible. I'm not sure how much you know, Alec, but I'll assume it's a great deal. If you become confused, I'll go back and explain. The last time I saw Norris, he was in this room. Getting nicely stewed and telling us what he thought of us. I went upstairs. So did everyone else."

"Everyone?" Alec interrupted. "Does that include Suzanne, Noble—Judith?"

"Judith hadn't arrived, but we expected her that night. Noble didn't join us upstairs. He went after Judith and he had orders to keep her away from the house as long as possible. Suzanne, so far as I know, stayed either in the kitchen or in her room."

"All of you then, with the exceptions you indicated, stayed upstairs. How long, Kip?"

"Perhaps half or three-quarters of an hour. I don't remember. How can you expect me to? When we found him dead, we went to pieces. Yes, me included. I knew what his death portended and it made a coward of me."

"But you all stayed in one group during this indefinite period?"

"No. We talked it over, agreed there was nothing we could do and then we separated. I'm not sure where the others went. I entered my room and took several good, long drinks."

"Then you are unable to claim an alibi for the time Norris was shot?" Alec was remorseless in his questions. "You can't even help any of the others alibi themselves?"

"I suppose not. You know a great deal. I can tell by the tenor of your questions. Whom have you been talking to, Alec?"

"Where was Doctor Prentice?" Alec asked, instead of answering the question.

"Out—somewhere. On a case, I suppose. He returned right after we found Norris dead. Whom have you been talking to? Answer me!"

"Not quite yet," Alec countered. "You all came down then, after Norris was found dead. Incidentally—who found him?"

"Peter. He let out a shriek like a banshee."

"Where was Alfred?"

"In his lab. At least, I suppose he was."

"There was a gun on the floor which I can prove belonged to Jerome. The murder gun. I can prove that too. Did Jerome acknowledge ownership of the weapon?"

"He didn't have to," Kip answered as he shrugged. "We all knew it was his."

"Who suggested concealing the crime?"

"Peter. He was supposed to be the smart one of the family and he took charge. All of us helped, of course. How many years does a man generally get for concealing murder?"

"Depends upon circumstances. At least I think you're telling the truth, Kip, because

your story coincides with Jerome's. I pinned him down and he talked. Don't blame him. I really had a lot of evidence on him. Now you'll have to join Jerome. I don't want you to warn the others. It's better if they tell their own stories."

SLOWLY Kip wagged his massive head from side to side.

"It's a strange sensation—taking the orders instead of giving them, but that's an awful big whip you hold in your hand, Alec. Go easy on Mother. This business almost drove her frantic. Overlook the drinking. She only did it to forget—to obtain sleep that wouldn't come to her otherwise."

"Come on," Alec said non-committally. "I'll take you to Jerome and Sergeant Nolan."

"So you're going to be tough about it." Kip didn't move. "You intend to take us, collectively, by the scruff of the neck and shake us."

"I'm going to do whatever is necessary to learn the truth," Alec told him. "And I won't like it anymore than you or the others will. Are you coming?"

Kip didn't answer, but he arose and walked silently beside Alec to the room where Nolan had Jerome in custody. Alec knocked, was admitted and after leaving Kip there too, headed for Noble Sanborn's room.

Dr. Prentice was seated at Noble's bedside when Alec entered. He looked up, rather startled.

"How is he?" Alec asked.

"Coming along. If the young idiot would stagger his drinks instead of swallowing a dozen as fast as he can get them down, he'd be better off. Terrible about Alfred, wasn't it?"

"I want to talk to you about that—in the library. Can you leave Noble for a little while?"

"He's just drunk," Dr. Prentice said. "He's in no danger at all."

Alec bent over the bed.

"Noble, sober up. Alfred has been killed. I'll want to talk with you later. Do you hear me?"

Noble opened one eye and studied Alec contemplatively. Then he grinned.

"Sure—talk to you. Like you, Alec. Nice guy. I like you very much. Talk to you any time."

"Good." Alec motioned Dr. Prentice to follow him and led the doctor to the library.

"That was some story you cooked up about the dog buried in the cellar, doc," Alec opened the conversation.

Prentice moved restlessly in his chair.

"You had an autopsy done on it, didn't you? Well, when I told you those facts, I was sore. I didn't give a rap what you thought. I killed that dog because it was vicious."

"Oh, stop it," Alec said wearily. "The dog belonged to Nick Norris and was in this house with him when Norris was murdered. Naturally the dog had to be disposed of some way and you fed it hydrocyanic acid."

"The dog wandered in and proved to be a dangerous animal," Dr. Prentice said with studied calm. "I don't know anything about any Nick Norris. You mentioned his name before I believe."

"Doc, shake hands with the cadaver you're cutting up at City Hospital," Alec sighed. "That's Nick Norris and you know it. The night he was murdered, you pronounced him dead. All I want from you is a complete story, but it must be the truth. The absolute truth because if you lie, I'll know it."

Dr. Prentice studied the blank wall across the room for a moment. Then he snapped himself out of that apparent mental fog.

"I doubt very much that you know anything. I don't fall for bluffs, Alec. You're like a hypochondriac who wants to be treated because he enjoys taking medicine. He throws a smokescreen of mock ailments over his good health. Bluff—sheer bluff."

"Nick Norris was murdered in that leather chair," Alec retorted. "He was shot through the heart. The bullet emerged, lodged in the framework of the chair and I found it. I also found the murder weapon—Jerome's automatic. I know that Nick Norris could have ruined this family. That you were indebted to the family to a great extent and risked your career and good name to help them out. I know you intended disposing of the corpse by smuggling it into City Hospital as a legally acquired cadaver for the purpose of anatomical study."

"What do you want me to tell you?" Prentice asked quietly.

"That's better. Why did you kill the dog?"

"I was truthful when I said it was vicious. A man like Norris wouldn't have anything but a vicious dog. Alfred didn't want him killed. He allowed the beast to occupy his laboratory until it became ugly. Afterward, Alfred and I buried it in the vegetable cellar. It seemed a safe place—until you arrived and then it was too late to do anything about it."

"And the body of Norris?" Alec asked.

"Alec, you must see my side of this if you can," Prentice said, very earnestly. "I met Mrs. Ander quite accidentally, at a time when

I was in danger of being kicked out of school because I lacked funds. She saw me through, set me up and then literally established me by having me live here. I owe her a great deal. Even if this means I lose my license to practise and I'm thrown into prison, I still will not feel I have repaid her in full."

"Yes," Alec commented enigmatically. "Now tell me what I asked."

CHAPTER XVII

Circle of Guilt

COLLECTING all of his composure, Dr. Prentice seemed to brace himself for the ordeal. He began to tell his story in a resigned matter-of-fact voice.

"The night that it happened—the night of the murder—I was out," he said. "I don't remember offhand just where I had been, but my books will show. At any rate, I was in the act of opening the front door when I heard Peter scream. Kip, Jerome and Mrs. Ander hurried down the steps. Suzanne came from her quarters at the rear of the house."

"Peter was unable to say much, but Kip explained what had happened. Norris, I judged, had been shot about thirty to forty-five minutes before. I base that upon the condition of the blood which had flowed out of the wound and the temperature of his body."

"Who suggested hiding the crime?" Alec asked.

"Peter. He said something had to be done. I—offered my services and we concocted a plan. We waited until the coast was clear and carried the corpse out to my car. I drove to a lonesome spot, waited a bit and then proceeded to City Hospital. It was very late by then. I knew the ropes. The elevator used by doctors who rent rooms on the top floor, wasn't manned. I merely carried the corpse into the elevator, took it to the refrigerator and tied a tag on it, showing the cadaver had been admitted to the hospital as a routine procedure. I even filed the duplicate tag in the records.

"Then, the next day, I appeared at the hospital, asked for my cadaver and the body of Norris was brought out. No one realized it was a surplus specimen. The whole thing was so simple it had to work—with a little luck on my side."

"Going back to the time you entered this house," Alec said. "Was there anyone else near the library?"

"Only Peter. Frankly, Alec, I thought all along that Peter killed him. Peter went to pieces so completely, it seemed to indicate he did it."

"Would he have reacted in the same way if he knew who really had done the killing?"

"Possibly. Peter was a type who betrays no nerves at all and yet is a seething mass of them. Alec, I'll make a bargain with you."

"Sorry, doctor, there can be no bargaining in a case of murder. You know that."

"But at least listen to me. I'll testify that Peter paid me to dispose of the corpse. That he admitted being the murderer. I know it means prison for me, but it will save these people."

"That's very generous of you, but it's no deal," Alec said. "The man I'm looking for deserves no break at all. He is a killer—three times a murderer. If he gets away with this, he'll strike again when someone makes a move against him. He has learned that murder is an easy way to acquire things or protect himself. He's dangerous."

"I suppose you're right," Prentice groaned. He looked up, hollow-eyed. "When do I start for jail?"

"Well, you're going if that's what you are trying to find out. I can't say when. Stay here, doc, until I come back. Don't try to run away."

"Very generous of you." Prentice had bitter sarcasm in his voice now. "I suppose you even believe I killed Norris?"

"You might have at that. The scheme for getting rid of the corpse seems almost too good to have been thought up on the spur of the moment. It was your idea too. In fact, doc, I almost hope it's you. If any member of the family is guilty, the others will take it pretty hard."

Alec left him there and went upstairs to Noble's room. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, an ice bag atop his head, a whisky glass in his hand.

"One thing about a hangover is the nice treatment it requires and deserves," he said with a grin. "Poison to kill poison. Funny how I like the stuff, but I do. I guess I wasn't much help, was I?"

"You were a confounded nuisance. You still are. Stop horsing around, Noble. Alfred is dead."

"I know, but who is to grieve over Alfred?" Noble sighed. "The poor chump never found out what life was all about. Have a drink

with me."

"No, thanks. Noble, I know all about the murder which really took place in this house. Kip, Jerome and Doc Prentice have admitted the whole thing."

NOBLE was pouring whisky into the glass. Both hands were very steady and he spoke without looking up from his task.

"I always had an idea they'd crack when the going got tough. Congratulations, Alec, on a nice job. What happens next? Oh say, the ice is all melted and I have to dilute the stuff that much anyway. May I go downstairs after some cubes?"

"I'll come with you," Alec said. "Bring the bottle. Maybe I'll have one too. Gosh knows I need something to bolster me up."

They walked downstairs, along the reception hall and turned into the dining room. Noble pushed open the swinging door to the butler's pantry and they entered the kitchen. Suzanne wasn't around. Noble procured a tray of cubes, another glass and sat down at the kitchen table. He had to push breakfast dishes aside to make room enough.

Alec took a long swig of his drink.

"They tell me on the night of the murder, you went after Judith with orders to keep her away from the house for awhile. How long was she with you?"

"About two hours," Noble answered. He moved several glasses into a straight line and piled smaller ones on top.

"Doing what?"

"Well, her train was late. I kicked around the station for awhile and finally she arrived. I took her to a cocktail room and kept her talking. I suppose it may have been even longer than two hours. When I got back, I didn't even know a crime had been committed. I thought Norris had simply gone his way and that my job to keep Judith out of his sight, was successful."

Noble piled still more glasses on top of the second row, intending probably, to create a pyramid like the one he'd made with the cocktail glasses on the bar of the Dresden Room.

"Then, when I learned the truth, I agreed that we'd best let things stand as they were," he said with a grimace at Alec. "You know—I rather think we'd have gotten away with it too if Peter hadn't cracked."

"No doubt about it. Noble, did Peter owe you any money? Did he keep you well supplied with it?"

"Keep me supplied?" Noble derided the idea. "I'm worth about a million dollars. At least my share of the estate runs into a figure like that. Peter gave me twenty-five dollars a week. If you call that being well supplied—I was."

Alec watched Noble balance a final glass atop all the others. It was an artistic but precarious trick, but Noble seemed to be an expert at it. He let go of the top glass very, very carefully.

"Then why would Peter have written and signed a check in your name for one hundred thousand dollars?" Alec asked pointblank.

The pyramid of glasses crashed, some to the floor, others just rolled across the table.

"What—did you say?" Noble asked.

Alec took the check out of his pocket.

"This was in Peter's wallet the day he was taken to the hospital. I'd say he was rather generous with you."

"Well, I'm a monkey's uncle!" Noble gasped. "The old boy really meant it after all! I've been beefing so much about going out on my own that he must have got sick of listening to me. He meant this as a stake. For all the times I cussed him out, I now apologize to his spirit. I'm rich! Have a drink, Alec? Have a dozen drinks. One hundred thousand dollars!"

"It isn't yours quite yet," Alec warned him. "However, it was clearly Peter's desire that you have this money so legally it's yours. I'll hold it a day or two."

"What if I want it tomorrow—now? What if I wanted to get busy and prove I can earn my own way without sponging on others?"

"You couldn't stir from this house," Alec told him.

THE young man stared at Alec.

"You don't mean that I'm suspected of—murder?"

"Everyone in the house is suspected. You less than the others for you and Judith seem to have the only alibis that can stand up. However, if you leave, I'll consider it an indication that you're afraid of something and I'll make out a warrant for your arrest."

"I couldn't go now, anyway," Noble shrugged. "Just make sure that check doesn't get lost. Peter can't write another."

"I'll take good care of it. You can go back to your occupation of sobering up now. Try to stay that way for a little while."

Noble tossed off the rest of his drink and walked out. Alec waited until he heard him cross the reception hall. Then he spoke aloud.

"Suzanne, you can come out from behind that door now. Don't ever listen so intently at a door so close to the people you are spy-

ing on. You get excited and breathe so hard it can be heard."

Suzanne, somewhat red of face, pushed open the door and came into the kitchen.

"That's my room," she said defensively. "I heard voices and paid no attention until the glasses crashed. I've told Noble to stop playing like a boy with blocks. He's ruined more glasses and dishes in this house than all the maids put together."

"He does seem addicted to that habit," Alec observed.

"He can't sit down without fussing like that. It used to give poor Master Peter the jitters. He'd watch the glasses grow higher and higher and then he'd bawl Noble out something awful."

"You listened to us talking, Suzanne. You learned that I've discovered there was a murder. What do you know about it?"

"Nothing, sir. Nothing at all, except what happened that night. It was terrible. I heard Master Peter scream and I hurried out naturally—"

"Were you dressed?"

"No. I had to look for my slippers and robe. I was about three or four minutes reaching the hall."

"Think carefully, Suzanne. The happiness of this family and your own, may depend on the answer you give. Running alongside the wall of your room is a stairway leading from the outside to the second floor. While you were finding your slippers, did you hear anyone going down those steps?"

She gave him a queer look.

"Now that you mention it, I think I did. But it was a little before Peter screamed. I was lying awake in bed. Worrying!"

"You didn't recognize the footsteps?"

"Oh, no, sir, they were pretty well muffled by the wall."

"And it was before you heard Peter scream. How long?"

"Why, no more than a minute or two. Do you mind if I clean up this mess? That Noble!"

Alec didn't answer. He went into the hall, looked up the stairway and then toward the library where the murder had been committed. He estimated distances and the time element. The murderer could have made his exit by that second floor stairway to the rear of the house. It was the safest possible way, unless he accidentally encountered some member of the household. Then the murderer could have merely pretended he'd just come out of his room.

Alec climbed the stairs slowly and purposefully. He got Sergeant Nolan out of the room, let Kip and Jerome go free and led Nolan to the fourth floor laboratory.

CHAPTER XVIII

Too Many Alibis

QUIETLY, yet impressively, Alec showed Sergeant Nolan the heavy brown bottle, still on the floor, the tipped can of ether and the Bunsen burner.

"What do you make of it, Erf?"

Nolan shook his head. "It's such a swell set-up for accidental death I get suspicious right away. Know of any reason for killing the kid?"

"Not yet. If he was murdered, he must have known or seen something which pointed to the killer. Young Porter would have been apt to put the police on his trail. After all, Norris was the kid's father."

"Let me nose around a bit," Nolan suggested. "I see Crowley's boys powdered everything for fingerprints. Ha! A killer like the one we're chasing doesn't leave prints about."

Alec was looking into one of the cabinets lined with bottles of chemicals. He checked through some of Porter's voluminous books of notes on experiments. Then Nolan called him over.

The detective sergeant pointed to the apparatus laid out on the bench in front of the spot where Porter had been killed.

"I'm not so good on scientific stuff. If you know anything about it, can you tell me what kind of an experiment he was doing just before he died."

"Not from the apparatus, but his notebook is over here," Alec said. "Let's see—these chemical formulae are almost Greek to me. Been a long time since I studied it. The apparatus looks slightly familiar though. Yes, it is. Porter was doing some analytical work by titration. Those are two burettes. One contains the solution to be tested, the other an acid or alkaline solution of known strength. Mixing the two until the acid equalizes the alkali, enables the chemist to tell the strength of the solution."

"It's still a silly language to me," Nolan grunted. "What I mainly want to know—is heat necessary for this particluar job?"

"No," Alec said. "It isn't. Why?"

"Then explain the reason for the lighted Bunsen burner. Little things like that, Alec,

point the way to a murderer. Porter was experimenting. He needed no heat. But the killer lighted the Bunsen burner because he had to have flame. He slugged Porter, then dropped the bottle on his dome. Next he tipped the ether can over and let the stuff drip out. It was like a time bomb. It gave the killer an opportunity to get away from here and establish an alibi. Ten or fifteen minutes must have elapsed before the ether fumes were thick enough to explode."

"You're right, of course," Alec agreed. "I wonder why Crowley's men didn't spot this?"

"That's easy to answer," Nolan said with open sarcasm. "Those four boys weren't picked for their ability as detectives, but as yes-men. They let Crowley have his own way. If he says it isn't murder, they don't do anything."

"We're getting there though," Alec said. "The Anders have explained everything that happened. I had them more or less pinned down so they were obliged to open up."

"Just as soon as you spring the gun on them, you'll learn plenty," Nolan said.

"Not so loud about the gun," Alec winked. "The gun made Jerome crack and gave me the leads I needed. But it's funny, Erf, how these suspects either have airtight alibis or none at all. There isn't much which can be broken down."

"I got a system," Nolan said. "Sometimes it works. It's worth a chance anyhow. The idea is—go back to the very first thing that happened and follow the whole case right down through the present moment."

"In that event we begin with Peter Ander going insane," Alec said. "Say—remember how he suddenly got up in the restaurant and for no reason at all started slugging a man at the next table with a water carafe? I wonder why he picked on that guy? I wonder what set Peter off at that particular moment?"

NOLAN looked at his watch.

"It's late, but if the restaurant isn't open, we can wake up the man who owns it. That's the fun of being a cop. They don't dare kick when you make 'em get out of bed."

"It won't be necessary, Erf. The man who was assaulted was hurt quite badly, but got home all right. The ambulance surgeon treated him and there will be a record of it, with his name and address. Run downstairs and find out, will you?"

"I'll have it in five minutes."

Nolan hurried off ahead in the direction of the phone ahead of Alec who descended more slowly. Alec was occupied with thoughts of alibis. He reached the second floor and walked down the corridor in search of Judith.

She was still with her grandmother. Old Mrs. Ander smiled wanly at Alec when he came in.

"We're quite a family, aren't we?" she said. "I don't condone murder, not even the killing of a man like Norris. We had no right to take his life although he was prepared to wreck us. As for me—I have no apology to offer. None would suffice."

"About getting yourself drunk enough to sleep?" Alec smiled. "I hardly blame you."

"He's an intelligent young man, Judith," the old lady said crisply. "You're doing well to get him."

"I know it," Judith linked her arm with Alec's.

Mrs. Ander went on. "It was a choice of drugs or alcohol and I preferred alcohol. It tastes better than medicine anyway. You see —I realized we'd never get away with this, especially when you appeared. Also, I saw the body of Norris or Porter, whatever he called himself. I—don't—think—I'll—ever—forget it. And now it's Alfred. Poor, harmless Alfred."

"Harmless to anyone but the murderer," Alec said. "He must have seen him or found some evidence pointing to him."

"I suppose so," Mrs. Ander said. "I'm grateful that Judith was kept away."

"So am I," Alec concurred. "That was one time when a late train helped. Noble told me the train was late, Judy. I'm glad."

Judith only nodded. She disengaged her arm and went over to sit down beside the bed again.

"I have some business outside," Alec told them. "It won't take very long, I hope. Better try to get some natural sleep, Mrs. Ander."

"I won't sleep until this thing is settled," she answered. "But don't worry about me. Kip and Judith are splendid nurses."

"Good night then, in case I don't see you before morning. I sincerely hope we can settle things and bring the house back to a normal state."

"It must be rather difficult making love under these conditions," Mrs. Ander said with a smile.

"You," Alec said with a wink at Judith, "are telling me."

He went downstairs to find Sergeant Nolan equipped with the name and address of Peter's victim and ready to go. They left the house and walked to where Nolan's car was parked.

"We'll probably get nowhere on this

hunch, but I always like to cover all the ground," the detective sergeant said. "We should have done it before."

"When?" Alec said in tones of derision. "Between trying to work on the murders and handling those gamblers the other cops so ambitiously brought in, I haven't even had time to eat or sleep properly. Worth it though—to meet Judith."

"I wonder." Nolan started the car. "You'll be in one tough spot if it keeps up."

Alec stared out of the car window at the deserted streets.

"Norris was murdered by one of them," he said. "So the rest put their heads together and decided to profit by his death. The only thing in extenuation is the fact that Norris was blackmailing them. Where does this man we're to see live?"

"Hundred and Sixty-first Street, way uptown. How are you going to explain all this to Crowley when we make the pinch—if we ever do."

"I'm going to resign. You can make the arrest and take the credit. You rate it, Erf. I'm going back into private practise. More money in it and less headaches. Remember, I'll have a wife to support."

"Wish I had one like her. How many millions in that family?"

ALEC didn't answer. He was thinking of those alibis again. There was something wrong there. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it was there.

No alibis at all, or air-tight ones. Everybody had a share of each. Or did they? Alec sorted the members of the family out in his mind. His feet were tapping a nervous tattoo on the floorboard when Nolan pulled up in front of an apartment house and broke his chain of thought.

Nolan rang the bell long enough to wake up the household and then he identified himself through the lobby phone and asked for David Firth. The door lock clicked. Nolan and Alec took a self-operated elevator to the fifth floor. A man, with a wad of bandage and adhesive on his scalp, met them in the hallway. He was attired in bathrobe and pajamas and yawned sleepily.

"My name is Hart and I am with the District Attorney's office," Alec said. "I'm investigating the assault made upon you by Peter Ander and there are some facts I must have."

"Aw forget it." Firth waved a hand. "I been paid off. Boy, was I paid off. One thing about that guy Kip—Is that the name?—he's no cheapskate."

"We know that and we're very happy about it, but something else developed. We must have the facts. You were seated at the next table to Peter Ander. There were other tables equally as close to his, were there not?"

"Sure, plenty of 'em. That's a busy restaurant and they push the tables pretty tight these days."

"Then why do you think Peter attacked you instead of someone else?"

"Shucks, the man was batty," Firth said somewhat inelegantly. "I just happened to be there."

"Was he watching you before he picked up the water carafe?"

"Yes, come to think of it, he was. Watching me like a hawk and I didn't like the way he looked either. I guess it must have been premonition or something. I believe in that stuff no matter what a lot of people say—"

"Exactly what were you doing when Peter arose? Be specific."

"I was nursing a big appetite and wondering when the waitress was going to bring my lunch. In between, I talked to Joey Walker, my pal, who was with me."

"Were you whistling or singing? Even tapping your feet?"

"Nope, I ain't the nervous type."

"Was this Joey Walker doing anything?"

"Joey? No. He's the quietest guy you ever saw. He gives me a pain. Scary too. Why, he nearly went nuts himself watching me balance a plate on a knife and fork. It's easy to do. You just prop 'em up exactly right, balance the plate—"

"Did—the—plate—crash?" Alec asked very gently, as if the words were as brittle as the china he referred to.

"Well, it fell off the knife and fork, yes, but it didn't bust."

Like a flash Alec turned and headed out of the hallway.

"Noble!" Alec shouted. "Erf, let's go!"

"Hey-hey, wait for me," Nolan yelled. He had to run to catch up with Alec. "What the devil has come over you?"

Alec was already pulling open the door of the police car.

"We've got to find a telephone quick," Alec said. "It's Noble we're after. He can't sit down at a table or a bar without stacking plates or glasses into all kinds of strange pyramids. It used to drive Peter's cautious, penny-pinching soul into hysterics every time he did it. When he saw this man Firth doing that, watched the balancing act and then saw the plate fall, that snapped the delicate thread between sanity and in-

sanity. In his new, crazy mind, he thought Firth was Noble. That's why he told him there must be no more murders."

"Holy cats, I get you!" Nolan said. "Look! There's a tobacco store. It's got a phone booth. I see the sign in the window."

"Let me off." Alec jumped from the car before it stopped, raced across the sidewalk and dived for the phone booth. He found a nickel, inserted it and dialed.

Kip answered.

"Noble?" he replied to Alec's question. "He's around somewhere. Last I saw, he and Judith were going up to the third floor. Alec—are you still there? Is something wrong?"

CHAPTER XIX

Once Too Often

RAISING her eyes suddenly, Judith looked up from her chair beside Mrs. Ander's bedside to see Noble Sanborn standing in the doorway, studying her intently. He came in.

"As one souse to another, I say it's a great life," he told his grandmother. "Judy, may I talk to you for a few minutes? About Alec. There is something you should know."

"I'll be right back." Judith patted her grandmother's wrinkled hand. "Try to rest."

Then she was at Noble's side and he was holding her wrist very tightly and smiling at her—a set, very steady sort of smile.

"We'll go upstairs to what is left of Alfred's lab," he suggested. "You don't mind —after what happened?"

"I'll go, Noble. You don't seem to be giving me much choice anyhow. What's wrong with you?"

He didn't answer, but he made certain she preceded him up the narrow steps to the fourth floor. She walked slowly. A feeling of lassitude had crept over her. Everything almost seemed to be unreal. She entered the water-soaked disordered lab. Noble closed the door behind him.

Judith turned around. Noble was staring at her. The horror of this nightmare exploded within her brain. Her eyes wavered from his and she discovered the room was blurred and out of focus. Her heart was pounding.

"Where has Alec gone?" Noble asked.

"I don't know. He didn't say. Noble, why did you tell them my train was late that night? It wasn't. You were late. I waited nearly half an hour."

"You know, don't you?" Noble said easily. "You guessed it. I could tell by the look in your eyes when I came to see grandmother."

"I—suppose I did." Judith was wondering what chance she'd have in trying to rush past him and reach the door. She decided there wasn't much. "But don't worry. I'll never tell on you. You're one of the family."

Noble hung his head, but he watched her. His voice grew hoarse as he spoke.

"I had to kill him. He was no good, Judy. Rotten all through. You and I, and all the rest of us are used to having money. With all my beefing about having nothing to do—this is the sort of life I enjoy and I'd never let some bigamous jailbird rob me of it. Nick would have ruined us. He knew just how."

"Perhaps it would have been better than what did happen," Judith said gently.

"Better? Are you crazy? We're big people. Some day all the dough will be yours and mine. I only did what was necessary to protect that. Now Alec Hart knows too much. If he finds out the train wasn't late —that I made up the story for an alibi, he'll realize I didn't leave for the station until after I'd returned to the house and gone to Jerome's room for his gun."

"Noble, please stop. Don't tell me these things."

"Why not? I got the gun and returned to the library. Norris was there, smirking and confident. I put a bullet through his heart, dropped the gun and ran because I was afraid the shot had been heard. I didn't go out the front door. Suzanne or someone passing by might have seen me. I knew the others were in conference so I went to the second floor and used those back steps to the courtyard. That's why I kept you waiting, Judy."

"What are you going to do now?" Judith asked.

"I don't really know," he said strangely. "Or no, that's a lie. I do know. There is only one thing I can do. Judith, Peter saw me. He saw me going down the back steps. He told me he was going to turn me over to the police so I killed him. I hated him anyway—so smug and penny-pinching. I visited him at the sanitarium, saw my chance and fixed the electrical shock machine. One of the doctors there told me they were going to give Peter a treatment with it."

HE WAS staring at Judith now, with eyes that had gone hard and cold.

"I killed Alfred too. Very cleverly. I don't believe anyone suspects. I was afraid of Alfred. He was much too unpredictable. If he learned that it was his father whom I killed, he'd have gotten out of hand. He didn't like me, any more than I liked him."

"Noble, are you going to kill me too?" Judith asked.

He nodded, very deliberately.

"You know the truth. You could send me to the electric chair. You're the only weak spot in my armor of alibis."

As he spoke, Judith realized the significance of the little things which should have pointed him out to her. Lazy by nature, he had been willing to slay in defense of his right to be lazy and rich. He'd always been like that—a liar, too, more often than not.

"Why does it have to be you?" Noble took two steps toward her. She didn't move. "You above all, Judy. It isn't going to be easy. I don't even know how I can arrange it to look accidental, but I'll think of a way. I'll make Doc Prentice help me. He's in this too—the sentimental fool."

He stopped five feet away from her, legs parted and braced.

Judith succeeded in keeping herself calm. She was trying to think, trying to waste time. Alec would return sometime. Oh, if he'd only known. If she'd only told him about Noble's lie. It was too late now. She could only hope to talk Noble out of it.

"It isn't necessary to kill me, Noble. I don't want to see you arrested. We're cousins. We've grown up together. Why don't you tie me up and then get away. You'll be miles from here before they find out."

"I can't," Noble groaned. "Alec has a check for a hundred thousand dollars. Peter made it out to me. He wanted me to take it and run away. I agreed, but he didn't have the check made out then. Later, he did fill it in and he went crazy before I got it. I must have that check and time to cash it. I know Alec isn't lying about the check because I stole Peter's checkbook so no one could see the stub."

"Alec will look for me first," Judith said stonily. "The instant I'm missed, he'll realize what's happened. You'll never get away with it, Noble."

"Perhaps I won't, but it's worth the chance. I've none at all so long as you live. I can't avoid it, Judy. I don't want to die. I want to live and enjoy all this money that is mine. I'll probably hate myself later.

Judith took her chance then. She sidestepped quickly and rushed forward. He seemed to have been waiting for just that. It was as if he wanted her to make the first move so his anger could rise to a pitch wherein murder became easy, even murder of someone he loved.

He seized her arm, swung her about and against the wall. The palm of his left hand struck her across the mouth and sealed the scream she tried to utter. The fingers of his right hand closed about her throat. . . .

She was dying. She knew it. The pressure on her windpipe, the aching in her lungs and, most of all, the deadly eyes of Noble as he stared at her. They all told her that death was here. There was agony in her chest, a roaring in her ears and still Noble pressed harder and harder.

Very dimly, she was aware of pounding feet and shouts. Suddenly the pressure on her throat was released. The sound of fighting reached her vaguely. There were more shouts and curses. Then someone picked her up and she was carried downstairs.

She awoke in her own bed with Alec and her father hovering over her. The tension went out of her then and she began to cry. Alec comforted her and she gradually pulled herself together. It was then that she noticed Noble, handcuffed to Sergeant Nolan.

"Darling," Alec said. "When I learned it was Noble and that he was in the house with you, I almost went frantic. You could have spoiled his alibi, couldn't you?"

JUDITH'S throat hurt terribly, but she managed to speak.

"I knew—when you told me that Noble said—my train was late that night. It wasn't. Noble was late because he lingered to—kill Norris."

"His whole defense was based on alibis," Alec said. "That was the trouble with it. Everyone else either had cast iron alibis for the murder periods, or none at all. A murderer would have made very certain of alibis, which Noble did. He based them partly on the fact that he was too drunk to handle himself, let alone kill someone.

"It was he who brought you to the Dresden Room and then phoned me to come. He knew I'd monopolize you, give him a chance to go to the bar where he had arranged ornamental palms so he'd be partly hidden. He ordered a lot of drinks, waited his chance and then scooted for the house. It wasn't far.

"Noble knew just what he had to do and it didn't take long. He was riding home with

us when the fire started. The bartender would have sworn he was at the bar because of all those drinks he'd served. We'd have believed the same thing. When he returned, Noble consumed those drinks as fast as he could get them down. That's why he was literally stiff."

"It was pretty tough going." Noble smiled wanly. "Alec, you're not a bad fellow. I don't blame you for this. I'm going to the chair, am I not?"

"A triple murderer usually does," Alec said. "If you'd killed Judith, there'd have been no electric chair for you. I'd have killed you myself."

"And I wouldn't have blamed you, Alec. Funny what a man will do to retain the power and influence a lot of money brings. I couldn't stand for it being any other way. But I wish I could do something to sort of—well, repay."

Alec studied him a few moments.

"I rather think you can—if you have the courage to do it."

Noble gave him a startled look. "You mean—?"

"Not suicide. You don't deserve it. I mean make a complete confession. Say that only you and Doctor Prentice knew about the killings and you prevailed upon him to dispose of the corpse by reminding him how much he owed the Ander family."

"I'll do whatever you say, Alec. I'll even be glad to. Sometimes I wish I'd had time to finish you off that night I kicked you down the stairs though. I saw Judy leaving and guessed you were down there. No—I'm wrong. I'm glad I never had the chance. I'm glad I didn't kill Judy. You see, I'm not such a bad fellow after all."

"You're a rat, but you happen to have an inbred conscience," Alec said. "Take him downstairs and have him write out a confession, Erf. Then get Doctor Prentice and take him in too. Prentice expects it."

* * * * *

"Alec," Kip started to say, "you'll never know how grateful we are—"

"Forget that," Alec snapped. "I did this for Judy's sake, mostly. Keep in mind the fact that I know all about it. Think of that when you feel an urge to supervise Judy or me. Because we're getting out. Maybe, after a time, we'll come back, but this family will have to change considerably."

"Alec." Judith was at his side, "I'm quite all right now. I want to leave here at once. I don't hate them. They tried to protect themselves and me too, but I want to go away for a while. I want to go with you."

"And who else did you think would take you away?" Alec demanded.

Her chin was high, her eyes clear.

"I'm ready now, darling. Let's go!"

"Who Knew That I Was Up There—Waiting to Be Murdered?"

THAT was the startling question which Elliott Pompton flung at private detective Moody Hackett. And it was indeed, a sixty-four dollar question which Hackett couldn't answer in a hurry.

Pompton had just had a narrow brush with death. He'd rung for an elevator—and the moment the elevator came up, it suddenly dropped down, leaving the door open behind it! And Pompton had almost walked right into space—saving himself by grabbing at the walls of the shaft.

It wasn't an accident, Pompton insisted. Somebody had recognized his ring. Somebody who was out to get him. And Pompton had some interesting ideas as to who that somebody might be.

Anyway, it was up to Moody Hackett to solve the problem—and once he tackled it, Moody found many new mysteries stemming from the original one! The whole story's told in DEATH WEARS KID GLOVES, Roger Fuller's smart, suspenseful and surprising complete novel in the next issue. It's a thriller packed with dynamic crime-fighting action!

The muzzle of a gun snaked through the curtains

A Chet Lacey Story

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

Darling, You Shouldn't Have!

Mrs. Roger Fenimore was pretty as a picture, and Sleuth Lacey found her in a murder frame!

THE screwy, merry-go-round technique some folks will employ to make a dishonest dime always amazes me. And pleases me, too, because it all helps to keep me in business. But for example, take the No. one wacky case that was recently handled by Chet Lacey, Private Investigator, which is me.

I was just about to go to lunch one day when the office door opened and in came something very nice in skirts. She was the Latin type in looks, and she had a figure that would be tops in any country you'd care to name. Well, just inside the door she paused and gave me a second scene entrance look. You know, head tilted a little, a faint smile, and one gloved hand out in a hesitant gesture.

"Mr. Chet Lacey?"

Yes, the voice went with all the rest, and the urge was great to leap out of my chair. However, I carry a scar that the most beautiful dame in the world gave me, so nowadays I make certain I touch first before I race on to second.

I nodded, half rose, and indicated a chair. It was a pleasure to watch her walk over and sit down. And it was more than a pleasure to get a whiff of the perfume she wore. Me, I wouldn't

know Chanel No. 5 from fuel oil. But whatever it was it made me think of Spring and flowers and stuff—including women.

"I am Mrs. Roger Fenimore, Mr. Lacey," she said. "I wish to hire you to find my husband."

Even though she was a lot to look at, I was hungry, so I didn't beat about the bush.

"With a blonde, you hope?" I asked.

That jolted her, and now I know what they mean by black lightning. I saw lots of it in her eyes.

"Of course not!" she snapped. "Why?"

"A divorce," I said.

"I don't want a divorce," she told me. "I want my husband."

"Good, because I don't handle keyhole divorce cases," I said, and I don't. "All right, Mrs. Fenimore. Your husband is missing? Let's have the story."

She didn't reply for a moment. She fumbled with a two-foot black handbag she was carrying, and I expected to see the old dab-of-a-handkerchief-corner-to-the-eye routine. But I guess she was just thinking up the next words.

"My husband has been missing for three days," she said. "Since Tuesday evening, to be exact."

"You saw him Tuesday evening?" I wanted to know.

"Yes. But right after supper he left the house. He told me he wouldn't be home much before midnight."

"That unusual?" I asked.

She shook her head and gave with the poor, faithful, lonely wife sigh.

"On the contrary it was very usual," she said. "For the last six months he has been going out at least five nights a week. But it wasn't to work, as he told me every time. It was to gamble."

Right then and there I began to take a real interest in the case. Any guy who would leave this choice bit of fluff five nights a week to go gambling was—Well, you're probably thinking the same thing.

"How do you know it was gambling?" I asked her. "Maybe it was to work."

"It was gambling!" she came right back in a that's-that tone. "My husband has an insurance office, and not once when I called there was the phone answered. True, when I told him next day that I'd called, he always said he was out with a client. But four nights ago I found out for sure it was gambling."

She was the kind who only gives a little of it at a time. So when she stopped I had to drop in another nickel.

"How did you find out?"

"It was really the next morning," she made things exact again. "I was emptying his pockets before sending his suit to the cleaners, and I found a couple of poker chips and a card from the Del-Ray Inn. On the back of the card it said, 'See Mike for next appointment.' I showed my husband what I had found, and—"

SHE didn't use the handkerchief, but it was more or less the same routine: bent head, bosom heaving as she struggled with her emotions. It was kind of nice, and while I waited I wondered what it was like to be Roger Fenimore.

"I'm afraid I lost my temper," she eventually continued. "I had been terribly upset for so long. Anyway, I demanded to know what it was all about, and what he had been doing all these nights. He admitted that he had been going to the Del-Ray Inn to gamble. Gambling is against the law, of course, so each of the players would be given a card to—"

"I know that," I broke in, just for the chance to hear my own voice. "He would see this Mike, and Mike would tell him when and where the next game would be held."

"Yes, that's right," she said. "That's what Roger told me. He also said they were to gamble again that night, and that he was due to make—"

She stopped short to shudder and lick her ruby lips.

"He said that he was due to make a killing that night," she went on in a couple of seconds. "And he swore that if he did he'd never touch another card. He said he'd be rich enough to sell out his business, and we could travel. I've always wanted to travel, and—"

"And he didn't come home," I shut her off. "And that was last Tuesday. Have you just been sitting wondering about him ever since?"

"Not wondering, Mr. Lacey!" she said and gave me a little more of the black lightning. "Rather, I've been worrying myself sick. At first I—Well, I thought that perhaps instead of winning, he had lost a lot, and didn't want to come home and tell me. But today I couldn't stand the waiting any longer. I called the

Del-Ray Inn, and spoke to a Mr. Carter. He said he knew my husband, but that he had not been at the Del-Ray on Tuesday. Well, I thought of calling the police, but—"

She stopped and looked at me, her eyes begging me to finish it. I did.

"You didn't want the publicity," I said. "Especially, if it turned out you were wrong. That it?"

"Yes, that's it," she said, and the smile was all for me. "But I had to do something. Well, I had heard about you, and I thought I'd see what you could do. You will help me, won't you, Mr. Lacey?"

I didn't say anything. That's rule five in my book. Never jump at anything—luscious or sour. I just sat as though I were giving it a lot of thought. And I was giving it some. Anyway, she misread my mind. She opened her bag, fumbled around inside and came up with two century notes—new ones.

"This is all I have with me," she said. "Will you take it as a retainer? And eight hundred more when you locate my husband?"

I gave her the old steady, expressionless look.

"Dead or alive?" I said.

I got fooled. She didn't so much as bat an eyelash.

"I've thought of that, too," she said quietly. "Yes, Mr. Lacey, I want you to find my husband—no matter what!"

I nodded understandingly, and went into another thought trance. Ordinarily I would have passed this one up completely. I admit there is dough in finding lost husbands, but I just don't like that kind of work. It makes me feel like an ambulance chaser, or something; the cases usually being that smelly.

There was, however, one little item in this case that intrigued me more than a little. A little item by the name of "Smooth" Carter, owner of the Del-Ray Inn, the leading trouble-spot of our fair community.

Carter well deserved his nickname. He was smooth as snake oil, plus being smarter than any fox that ever walked. Over the years a lot of crimes, small and not so small, should have been pinned on Carter, but they never were because of lack of evidence that could stand up in court. Once or twice I thought I had him, but each time I came out second best. Yes, all in all, Smooth Carter was good, in his crooked, tricky way. And that was another reason I hated his hide.

As I thought things over I told myself that Carter might not have had a thing to do with this case. Maybe Fenimore had tired of the luscious Latin type, and had gone off with the usual blonde. Nevertheless, Carter's name had a lure I couldn't resist. Also, there were a few other reasons that made me pick up her two century notes, and give her my winning smile.

"All right, Mrs. Fenimore," I told her, "I'll give it a try. Give me your home address and phone number. I'll get in touch with you from time to time."

AFTER she had gone I leaned back, cocked my feet up on the desk, sniffed the lingering waves of that swell perfume, and wondered if I shouldn't have taken my client out to lunch. Presently I got around to doing some real business thinking. I went through the card file in my brain, and checked on one or two things that occurred to me. I also made a few phone calls. By then it was close to three and the old stomach was really threatening to leave me cold, and go out by itself. So I went to lunch.

The Del-Ray Inn is located about seven miles from the center of our business district, way out by the river. When I parked my car and walked toward the main entrance, it was a little before nine. Business was getting under way, but it would still be another couple of hours before the joint was swinging in high.

The hatcheck girl gave me a hopeful smile, and a bull in a tux near the door gave me the hard eye, with just a faint glint of surprise. I knew him, of course. An ex-con who had served his time, and was now going straight, under the guiding hand of Smooth Carter! As a matter of fact I had helped my old friendly enemy, Lieutenant Hal Bierman, of Homicide, to send the lug up for his seven-year stretch. So naturally he wasn't glad to see my map.

Anyway, I ignored him and went to the half-filled bar and bought a drink. As I sipped it I took a casual look around. I saw several chaps with the wrong wives, and three or four lads you could hire for a hundred to do most anything. None of them, though, interested me any.

As far as I'm concerned, sin is sin, and crime is crime. Until somebody hires me. Then it's different. So I just fin-

ished my drink and had another. I waited maybe ten minutes, and then the bull in a tux—Tug Ames, was the name he went by—eased up next to me.

"Everything all right?" he asked without looking at me.

"It was," I said, and let him think it over.

"Looking for somebody special? I know every guy and dame in the place."

"Yeah," I said, and studied my drink. "Guy by the name of Smooth Carter. Is he around?"

A couple of minutes of silence. Then:

"Could be. What about?"

I turned my head and gave Tug the icy glare.

"I'll tell him when I see him," I informed him nicely. "Now you go tell him!"

Tug looked at me like he wished I was a cripple so's he could knock the daylights out of me. Then he grunted and left the bar. Six minutes later I was in Smooth Carter's office.

Smooth lived, and ran his various enterprises, from a beautiful suite of rooms above the main floor of the inn. And I do mean it was a beautiful suite of rooms. But as I'd been in them before, I didn't pause to admire this time. All my attention was concentrated on the man seated across the block-size desk.

Carter was about my age, but that's as far as the similarities went. The man was a looker, the perfect women-fall-down-boom type, and he wore the kind of clothes that go with it. Sure, I'd like to say he had the eyes of a snake, thereby revealing the similarity. But he didn't. He was absolutely okay on the outside. It was the inside that made him what he really was.

"Well, well, Lacey rides again!" he greeted me after Tug had scrammed. "When they told me you were downstairs, I figured it was to see me. Or is there another attraction?"

"Just slumming," I said, and helped myself to one of his cigarettes. "How's the gambling going these days? The take pretty good from the suckers down below?"

He showed me his too-perfect teeth in a wide grin, and settled back more comfortably in his chair.

"About fifty-fifty, pal," he said. "And quote me to Hal Bierman, if you like. Maybe he'd like to make another raid on my place. I haven't seen Bierman and his club-heads for almost a year now. Yeah, tell him we're open the usual hours. Six to three."

"Hal doesn't handle small fry stuff any more, but I'll pass him the word just the same," I told him, and blew smoke across the desk. Then, watching him, I said, "How about Roger Fenimore? Did he clean up Tuesday night, or get cleaned out?"

A blank. Smooth was never the one to be caught off second by a quick question. He just looked at me.

"Neither," he said. "Fenimore wasn't here Tuesday night. Haven't seen him for a long time. So she hired you, huh?"

"Who hired me?"

Carter made an impatient gesture with one hand.

"You should stooge for Abbott and Costello, Lacey!" he snapped. "The dame who called me this morning! Said she was Fenimore's wife, and had he been here? I told her I knew Fenimore, but hadn't seen him for a long time. And I haven't."

I WAS only half listening because the brain was suddenly clicking on all sixteen. I mean that the instant I entered Carter's office, something—well, like an invisible finger—had started tapping the old brain. And now, out of the blue, I had cottoned onto what it was all about. I nodded across the desk to Carter.

"Check," I said. "Mrs. Fenimore hired me to find her husband. He's been missing since Tuesday, right after supper. You say she called? Did she by any chance come out here?"

"No," he said. "Not to see me, anyway. But I wouldn't know her if I saw her, as a matter of fact. I know Fenimore, but not her."

I grinned at him and let it slide into a leer.

"Your loss, Smooth," I said, mashing out my cigarette. "You've missed something in life if you haven't met her. Well, I said I was just slumming, so I'll be on my way. Got a game on tonight, by any chance?"

A couple of expressions zipped across Carter's face. I wanted to believe they were surprise and chagrin, but they came and went so fast I couldn't be sure. Then he was giving me the smooth smile.

"Sure, Lacey," he said, remaining seated when I rose. "If you're broke I

can let you have a grand, and forget about it."

"Thanks, but I never use that kind of money." I moved toward the door. When I reached it, I looked back at him. "Fifty grand, plus!" I said with a sigh. "And me working for peanuts!"

"Huh? What was that crack?"

I let Smooth Carter's words echo around the room, and closed the door. Then I went downstairs to the bar and had me another drink. Not because I wanted one, or because I wanted an excuse to hang around there any longer. But simply for something to do while the brain did some work. The picture was beginning to show a little. Very, very dim, but it was there. The only trouble was that a solid brick wall a mile high blocked off the rest of the view.

Anyway, I did some very heavy thinking, and got nowhere. So I took my hat from the hopeful dame on duty at the checkroom, gave her no hope with my smile, ignored Tug who was lingering around, and went out to my car.

I sat behind the wheel for maybe five minutes, banging the brains for a tip-off on my next move. The only result I got was that it seemed the sensible idea to go home. Or maybe go see the nice Mrs. Fenimore, if she were home.

My mind still not made up, I tooled the car out of the parking lot and onto the road heading back toward town. I drove along easy for about two miles, and then my decision was made. But not by me. It was made by the business end of a gun jammed against the back of my neck, an inch below the hair line, and a voice that didn't have one bit of fooling in it.

"Take the next left, Lacey! Don't, and you don't live so long!"

Surprise, surprise for the dumb Lacey! Now, he finds out that he has a passenger. With so many thoughts of other things in my head, it hadn't even occurred to me to take a look before I slid behind the wheel. Frankly, though, I hadn't expected Smooth Carter to be so crude.

I held the speed steady. When there's a gun against your neck you just can't pull any miracles.

"Carter is slipping," I said. "This will be too bad for both of you."

The voice laughed, and I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all.

"Smooth Carter?" it said. "The guy who owns that joint? Me, I'd like to have him at the end of this thing, too!"

By way of emphasis he gave me a jab that hurt. But I didn't mind the pain so much as I did his words. What I had down all pat suddenly didn't make sense.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Just what I said," the voice replied. "I'd like to do business with that mug, too. Pay off a couple of things, like I'm paying off for a couple of things you did, you ratty gumshoe!"

The hair on the back of my neck was getting almost stiff enough to push the gun away. I had done everything with my ears while the voice talked, but though I like to boast I'm tops, or at least close, in spotting voices, I couldn't place that one to save me.

"Who are you, and what's this all about?" I asked as calmly as I could, considering. "Maybe you got the wrong man."

He didn't answer right at the moment. He gun-jabbed my neck first.

"Right here, Lacey! Turn off! If you don't want to, that'll be okay, too."

Yeah, we had come to a road turning off on the left. I didn't catch where it led for a second. And when I did, I really began to feel bad. It wasn't a bad road, not for the first five or six miles. But from there on it was just a dirt affair. The condition of the road, however, wasn't what started lead balls bouncing around in my stomach. It was where it led to, that bothered me.

YEARS ago town and state funds had been appropriated to build a new super-highway that went right through the mountains to the next state. It would cut a couple of hundred miles off the regular route, and save a lot of time. However, the job was tougher than the engineers had figured. The dough ran out, came the war, and there was no chance of another appropriation.

Result, six miles of fine highway, and thirty-five miles of dirt road that just puffed out into nothing. And not so much as a single shack from beginning to end. Maybe fifty times a year a car would travel over it, and Lacey's car was now making one of those fifty trips.

"Nope, I got the right man, Lacey," the voice interrupted my unpleasant thoughts. "And skip who I am. Just another dumb bunny you helped stick in the Big House for a spell. But now

the dumb bunny pays off, see? Luck, it was. I just happened to see you park this heap and go into that joint. I see this back seat nice and dark. You'll never get a sweet chance like this again, I tell myself. And so here we are. I—Easy, chump! I ain't made up my mind if I should let you have it. Don't go making it up for me, see?"

This last was because I had eased the car toward the side of the road. I wanted to see if I could slam it into the ditch before he'd have a chance to press the trigger. True, I might get knocked cold by the crash, but my gun was in my shoulder holster where I couldn't reach it, and cracking up seemed the only bet. The voice had obviously been ready for that. I straightened out and drove along at an even thirty-five.

"Just what have you got against me, friend?" I finally said after a two-mile silence.

"Plenty! Just keep driving."

Another three miles, and I tried again.

"You pay off a funny way, pal," says I. "I should think you'd like me to know who's giving me the works. Who are you, anyway?"

"Skip it," he snapped. "I'm having my fun, gumshoe. That's all I want."

I gave up trying, then, and just went on driving. But way, way back in my head a tiny light was beginning to flicker. The tiny light of understanding. At least, I tried to make myself believe it was understanding. Anyway, I suddenly thought I knew beyond all doubt that the lug in back had no intention of killing me, no matter what I tried to pull.

So I decided to risk it. I get awfully fed up after awhile with a gun stuck against my neck, and besides, I had things to do about the where, what, and how of Roger Fennimore. I squinted ahead and picked out a sizable tree on the left side of the road. Yes, the left, because the right side at that point dropped off for some three hundred feet, practically straight down. It would have to be the left side, and the tree I spotted was just what I wanted. I silently apologized to my car, told it I was very sorry, but this was how it would have to be.

But, I was wrong! Maybe the voice read my mind. I think I even sensed it, but that didn't do me any good. Lightning cut my head in two and threw both halves into a maelstrom of roaring darkness. Chester Lacy didn't know anything more for a long, long time.

As a matter of fact, it was on the dot of seven in the morning when I had the will to open my eyes and keep them open. The sun was coming up, the early morning birds were singing—and my head was a boiler factory of pain. For a spell I didn't care where I was, or what had happened, or even if I were dead or alive.

But eventually I pulled myself together. I was stretched out on the grass under the tree I had picked out. My car was gone, and so was my gun, wallet, and the dollar or so of silver I'd had in my pocket. Cleaned, a long, long way from home, and a lump of fire in my head.

I spent the next five minutes cursing everything, but mostly Chet Lacey. Then I pushed up on my feet and started walking back. It was the only thing to do. If I just sat and waited for a car to come along and pick me up, I'd probably still be waiting. Nope, it was start walking, and start walking I did. Not fast, though, because I figured I had at least twelve miles ahead of me before I hit the main road.

As I plodded along that forsaken road in the early sunshine, never had I so yearned to get my hands on a man as I did the owner of the voice. I tried to console myself with the picture of meeting up with him one day, but it didn't help any. As a matter of fact, nothing helped as I put one foot in front of the other over and over again.

When I had gone about a mile I saw something that took my mind off my aches and pains. As I have explained, the outside of the road dropped almost straight down for about three hundred feet. As I was walking along I saw car tracks that had swerved off on that side, and three or four small trees that had snapped like matches where a car, or maybe something else, had crashed through them on its way down that three-hundred-foot drop.

STEPPING up my pace a little I crossed over to that side and came to a halt at the spot. The tracks were those of a car, or maybe a small truck. I took a look over the edge but couldn't see anything at the bottom. It was easy enough to follow the course of the thing by the broken off trees and the slope bushes that had been torn out by the roots. We hadn't had rain for a week so all the marks were pretty clear. They

looked as though they'd been there for a few days at least.

And then suddenly I caught a glimmer of something far down at the bottom, like sun on strips of silver, or chrome. Anyway that was enough for Chet Lacey. I always was a curious guy, and there's more than one scar on my hide to prove it. So naturally I went down for a look-see. No, not just like that. I mean, fast like. It was one of the toughest things I ever tackled, and the lump on the head made it even tougher. A million times I lost my hold on a branch or a shrub root, and went sliding. All in all I went a quarter of the way down on my feet, and the rest on my face and rear end.

Anyway, I did get down, and all in one piece. And it was a car. A club coupe Chevvy that was just a heap of junk now. It was buckled and twisted like a pretzel, with the engine almost completely buried under.

But the important thing was that there was a stiff behind the wheel. I'm telling you he wasn't nice to look at. No stiff is nice to look at after he's been in the open air for a few days, and this one had taken a three-hundred-foot tumble in addition.

It took me a moment or two to make the stomach behave, and then I went to work. I couldn't get him out of the wreck but I was able to reach into his pockets. The result? All kinds of identification that in life he had been Roger Fenimore!

Well, I had earned the other eight hundred dollars, but I didn't think of that dough as I stared at the stiff. I thought of a lot of other things. All of which made me madder by the minute. Then when I had cooled down I went to work again. I took a good look, and then another. And a half hour later when I started that hellish climb back up to the road the whole picture was very clear. The only thing left was to decide where to hang it. And—who to hang along with it!

The sun was sliding down for another good-by to our side of the world when I finally got back to my apartment in town. The first thing I did was go straight to the medicine cabinet and drink four fingers of the kind of medicine I keep there. Then I stripped off my clothes and leaped, I mean limped, into the shower.

After I had soaked out most of the pain I toweled myself and had some more medicine. Then I shaved and dressed in fresh clothes. Lastly, I took a glass of medicine into the other room and plopped down in my favorite chair.

A little after nine that night I paid off the taxi about a block from Mrs. Roger Fenimore's house, and went the rest of the way on foot. It was a nice-looking house, in a nice neighborhood, and as I jabbed the front door bell I felt more sorry for poor Fenimore than I had for any man in a long, long time.

The door was opened almost before I had my finger off the button. There she stood in a plain, simple number that would knock your eye out. But I didn't waste more than a second looking at what she was wearing.

It was her face that interested me, and what I saw in it made me feel good. The lady was fighting the battle of the century to keep her emotions under control, and said emotions were running the gamut from A to Z. When she saw who it was she reached out, grabbed my hand, and practically yanked me inside.

"Mr. Lacey, what's happened?" she gasped and hand-heeled the door shut. "I've been going out of my mind ever since your phone call. What— Oh, I'm sorry! Let's go in here."

She took my hat, dropped it on a small hall table, and led the way into a living room that was really furnished nice. Journey's end was a mile-long and half-mile-wide davenport set an an angle from a fieldstone fireplace. A coffee table was in front of the davenport, but there wasn't any coffee on it. There was a pinch bottle, ice, soda, and two glasses. Yes, that room was really furnished nice!

"I suppose you'd like a drink?" she asked with an effort as we both sat down. "Men talk better if they have a drink in their hand, don't they? But while I make them, please tell me! What did you mean on the phone, it's more serious than I could imagine? He—? Roger is dead?"

Suspense is better than a rubber hose any day in the week. So I just waited until she had made the drinks and handed me mine.

"Yes, your husband is dead," I said. "Very dead. He was murdered."

She gasped and let a little of her drink spill on her dress.

"No!"

"Yes," I said. "And don't be like that, Mrs. Fenimore!"

A split second of silence, and though I purposely wasn't looking at her I could feel her black eyes boring into the side of my face.

"Just what do you mean, Mr. Lacey?"

It was said with all the effort in the world to be naturally curious. But to me it was just a high pop-out. I held my tongue for a moment and lazily glanced about the room. It was a swell room, and I made a mental note to get a pair of carmine curtains like the ones drawn between the room we were in and what I imagined was the dining room beyond. They were the real stuff. Rich in color, and tastefully expensive.

"You know what I mean," I finally said, turning my head a little toward her. "When you came into my office yesterday morning you knew your husband was dead. You knew he'd been murdered, and you knew why!"

"That's a lie!" It came out like a hiss.

I SHOOK my head, shifted my drink to the left hand, and slid my right into my jacket pocket as though fishing for a cigarette. I let my hand stay there.

"No, the truth," I contradicted. Then, giving my voice the edge, "And the juries in this town don't like ladies who help cover up their husbands' murders. They don't like it at all!"

She was shaking so much she had to hang onto her drink with both hands.

"I—I don't understand you!" she finally got out with a rush. "I don't know what on earth you're talking about!"

I leaned back a little more and gave a patient sigh.

"All right, I'll tell you. Stop me where I go wrong. A little of it is guessing. Well, you and Smooth Carter were—are—that way about each other. How long, doesn't matter. Eventually your husband found out and he didn't like it. He paid the bills around here and had his rights. So he went to tell Smooth he didn't like it. Something happened—maybe a fight. That doesn't matter, either. Anyway, your husband came out the small end. So, a corpse."

I paused and deliberately took a long drink. I could smell that perfume she was wearing, and it was nice.

"Smooth is a very clever guy," I went on. "He wanted you, and he also wanted something else you could give him—your husband's fifty thousand dollars' worth of life insurance. So—"

"You're mad! This is insane! I—"

"I checked," I cut in on her ranting. "It was fifty thousand. Well, when a man is found murdered there's an investigation. Lot's of things that hold up lots of other things. Smooth Carter couldn't wait that long for you, or the fifty grand. So what to do? Just ditch the corpse and wait six years for him to be pronounced legally dead? No. Not for Smooth; he has a brain. So he drove, or had one of his apes drive, your husband way out the unfinished highway. At the three-hundred-foot drop he stopped with the car pointed toward the edge. Then he put your husband behind the wheel, started the car, and stepped out. The car went over and down, boom. So far, so good."

I paused again and took a squint at her out the corner of my eye. Will somebody please tell me why women in terror have a sort of weird beauty in their expressions?

"So far, so good," I continued. "Now to have the dead man found and the world to learn that the poor man had driven to his death—perhaps while drunk. Not easy, because that road isn't traveled once in a blue moon. And besides, a passing car might miss the spot. But Smooth has plenty brains! He got you to come to me with your story. Naturally I went to see him. He knew his name would be bait enough for me.

"Well, I didn't learn anything from him, at least so he thought. But skip that for a moment. When I left the Del-Ray, there was a lad in my car. He had a gun, and he made me think he was just some ex-con who wanted to pay off an old score with me. I did think that for a spell. He made me drive out that road until we were a bit past the drop. Then he clouted me, cleaned me, and dumped me on the side of the road, drove away to report to Smooth that things were as they should be. So far so good some more."

"This is madness! It's madness!"

Like a broken record. I didn't pay any attention.

"The short and long of it all," I started telling her, "was that when I came to and started hoofing it back, I would see where the car went over, go down to investigate, find your husband and then tell you about it—which is exactly what I did. Result! Your poor husband killed in an accident of his own doing. No knife,

no bullet holes, no nothing to prove it was murder.

"His body was even too mashed up to tell that he had been clubbed to death. Perfect! You and Smooth get each other —and fifty thousand in insurance cash, plus whatever assets your husband had. Perfect—only it wasn't perfect!"

"Why, this is fantastic! How dare you—"

"Shut up!" I shot at her out of the corner of my mouth. "When I went to see Smooth I could smell your perfume all over his office yet he said he didn't know you from Adam—Eve! Smooth, or one of his apes, messed the body-dumping. The cops are smart, too. They'll see that the car is in second gear, and that the dash gas plunger is pulled all the way out! A man driving in second gear with the gas plunger out? Ridiculous! And another thing. Just a small amount of checking will show that your husband did spend a lot of evenings at his office. Those were the evenings you went to the Del-Ray, not your husband. Look, lady, you're—"

"Stop! I can't stand it! I don't care. Yes, you're right. Roger found out. He went to Smooth, and Smooth hit him with a—"

If she finished the rest I didn't hear it. My big moment had arrived. The muzzle of a gun came snaking between those drawn curtains, but it did not spit flame and smoke; the gun in my right jacket pocket spoke first. And it is a habit of mine to always shoot for keeps. I feel that it helps me live longer.

Anyway, the curtains jerked a little as my slug went through them. Then they split wide open and Smooth Carter fell through, right down smack on his face. As he fell I saw the dead center of his white shirt front turn a glistening red, so I didn't waste another shot. I looked at the Fenimore woman. In twenty seconds she had become ages older, but still an awful lot to look at.

"There's why I phoned you that screwy call," I said to her. "I knew if I got you worrying you'd get in touch with Smooth. You did, and he came here to listen in—as I expected. I had all the facts, but they would be tough to prove. So I had to make you and Smooth prove them for me. You did. Here, drink this. You need it more than I do!"

I poured what was left of my drink into her glass as she sat there staring dull-eyed off into space. Then I went over to the phone in the corner. Before I called the cops I took a look at Smooth Carter, and suddenly I was very sorry he was dead. Alive, he could tell me who the mug was with the voice, but now that he was dead— Oh, well, guys in my business don't get everything their way!

Larry Grant unwittingly sends an innocent man to jail—and then is faced with the problem of finding the real killer of Vivian Hall in order to free his friend

IN

FLOWERS, MY PRETTY ONE

A Brilliant Complete Mystery Novelet

By WAYLAND RICE

Coming Next Issue!

A bullet tore through the plaid at Nick's shoulder and nicked Willy's ear-lobe

FIT TO BE TRIED

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Willie Klump, the Hawkeye Hawkshaw, tackles a tangled case of murder and loot, and gives the miscreant plenty of rope!

IT WAS a morning when the mail at the Hawkeye Detective Agency was quite heavy, and William Klump, President, was as excited as a moth feeding on Lana's shirred beaver coat when the postman dumped it on his desk.

"You sure rang twicet this mornin'," Willie said. "Join me in a crumb bun an' a cup of coffee."

"Don't mind if I do," the postman said, then quickly took a gander at the mail. "Oh, I almost done it again. This stuff, all but three letters, belongs to the Hawker Disinfectant Company next door. I'll take a little sugar in my coffee."

"I just happened to think," Willie snapped, "I am short of crumb buns this A. M. An' I'll need all the coffee I got. I am a busy man so run along."

"Yeah?" the postman griped. "I hope what letters you got are dunnin' you for all the dough you got."

"You come under Civil Service, don't you?" Willie sniffed. "Then try actin'

civil before I report you to Farley."

"Farley? He ain't been postmaster since—"

"I didn't see the newspapers this mornin'," Willie snapped. "Now go away."

Willie Klump opened his mail. One letter was soliciting funds for an organization that had been formed for the purpose of suppressing crime.

"That is a lot of senst," Willie scoffed. "They would ask me to support the Temperance Union if I owned a chain of breweries."

The second letter was from the Policemen's Benevolent Ass'n, and contained four tickets at three dollars per. The typewritten message assured William that he would send a check immediately.

"It is intimation!" he grouched. "They are worst robbers than they go out huntin' for. What's the use of lookin' at any more mail?"

Willie ate the rest of his breakfast and was tidying up when a tall, cadaverous citizen walked in. Willie almost told him that he must be mistaken about an address, as U.N.R.R.A. was in Washington. Anyway, the wheat shipments were none of his doings.

"Ah, Mr. Klump, I presume?"

"Have a chair," Willie said. "You're a client, I presume?"

"I am. I note that you find missing persons."

"If they're above ground, we find 'em," Willie said.

"I am Humphrey Buff. Perhaps you know I am appearing at Radio Theatre this week."

Willie shook his head.

"My specialty is escaping from safes," Buff said, lifted the skirts of his plaid coat, and sat down. "Once, I had a partner."

"I begin to see," Willie said, assuming a professional mien. "He got in a safe oncet an' was stumped. Somebody moved the safe and you never got the forwardin' address."

Humphrey Buff swung his head around on his turtlelike neck and read the letters on Willie's door as if to make sure he had come to the right place.

"Nothing of the kind," he said, eyeing Willie again. "It was because poor Elert could not tolerate hunger any further, my friend. Fifteen years ago, vodville became a precarious method of making a living, and Elbert packed up one night and left Kankakee where we were showing. I have not seen him since. Now that it has come to pass that trodding the boards is once more a lucrative—"

"His full name?" Willie interrupted, reaching for paper and pencil.

Elbert Eely, Escape Artist Extraordinary!"

"H-m-m," Willie said.

"I—er—changed my name when I went back to the stage again, Klump. In those days we were known as Squirmerhorn and Eely. I have an old copy of Variety I shall leave with you. When I knew Elbert last he was about five feet, eight, had a black mustache and a mole over his left eye. If you find him, Klump, I will pay you five hundred dollars."

"Dear or alive?" Willie said sharply.

"Well—er—no. If you find that Elbert is defunct, the fee will be three hundred."

"It is harder to find citizens who no longer walk about," Willie pointed out. "But it is a deal. Of courst, there will be expenses."

"Keep them down, Mr. Klump," Buff said.

"Supposin' I locate him in Manchuria," Willie argued. "I do not own my own airplanes."

"Let's stop being silly, Mr. Klump. I'll see you are adequately reimbursed."

"It was the pay I was worried about. All right, I'll take the case. All right, you give me the addresses where you'll be the next six months or so. Glad to have met you, Buff."

The actor placed an old magazine on Willie's desk, and Willie picked it up and tucked it away among his comic books on top of the filing cabinet. For an hour after Buff had departed, the president of the Hawkeye Detective Agency wondered where in the world he would start looking for Elbert Eely.

"I better sleep on it," Willie said. "I wisht I was half as smart as Satchelfoot Kelly thinks the D.A. thinks he is. First, I could maybe canvass the morgues everywhere by mail. I never had such a stiff assignment. Oh, well, I can afford to take my time as the dividends should start rollin' in soon. Mr. Plochnitz said I could expect 'em the first of the month. Hah, wait until I show Gertie the check. I'll show her how dumb I really am!"

The phone rang as Willie started visualizing a twelve-cylinder jaloppy with plush upholstery and a built-in frozen

food cabinet.

"Hello," Willie said. "Hawkeye Dividend and Limousine Co. I mean—"

"This is Kelly," a voice said.

"Up to now I was havin' one of my good days," Willie snapped. "What you want?"

"Do you know a Gasper J. Plochnitz?"

"I—I do. But how would you, Satchelfoot?"

"Oh, I meet all kinds in this business, Willie. I threw him in the hoosegow last night. He had a sucker list on him, and guess whose name was on it?"

"Mine," Willie said. "That is, I was one of the preferred clients."

"Ha-ha!" Kelly laughed. "Atomizers, Incorporated. How much you buy, Willie?"

"A thousan' shares at fifty cents a share," Willie said, beginning to feel a little woozy.

"Yeah? Atomizers. Ha-a-a-a-ah!"

"Atoms is everything today," Willie said. "Mr. Plochnitz says after they blowed up Bikini, the stocks would rise like jet planes. There would be atoms workin' electric toasters an'—"

"We raided Plochnitz's office. There is a little store-room with about a hundred atomizers in it. The glass ones with the rubber bulbs you spray cologne with. Oh, Willie!" Satchelfoot howled.

Willie hung up and fell into his chair as limp as garbage pail lettuce. Five C's had taken wing, had flown the coop more conclusively than had Elbert Eely. Gertie would find out before the noon whistles, and she would have a dozen more synonyms for the word "moron" when he met her face to face.

"I can't be as dumb as I act," Willie told himself. "Who could? But I must have been. Well—"

Again the public utility necessity clamored to be answered. At first Willie ignored it, hardly in the mood to argue with Gertie Mudgett over the fact that there might be insanity in his family most anywhere. But he concluded that he might as well take the rap sooner as later. He snatched up the phone.

"All right, go ahead!" he yelped. "Say it all at oncet, you—"

It was not Gertie's gravelly voice. It was a scared squeaky one.

"Please come to Four-ninety-seven and a half West Twentieth Street at once, please!" it said. "It is a robbery. Oh, do hurry!"

"You should of called the public detectives!" Willie said. "Im a private . . . Hello! Hel-l-llo! She's hung up. Oh, what a day so far! I got to look for a missin' person I can't never find. I get bankrupt, and now—well, I'll call Kelly and the real cops. What am I sayin'?"

Willie did not call Headquarters until he got to a cigar store a block from the scene of the felony. Then Willie Klump went on and rang the bell of an old brownstone that looked as if it had not been lived in since Dewey smeared the Spaniards at Manila. A little wrinkled doll opened the door. She let Willie into a place that was an antique dealer's dream. Smells belonging to the Gay Nineties slapped Willie in the face.

"Oh, thank heaven, you got here," said the little old doll. "I'm Miss Penelope Paisley."

PENELOPE wore a taffeta dress that Hetty Green must have tossed away. She swung a lorgnette and had a big tortoise shell comb sticking out of the pug at the nape of her neck. She led Willie into a library that would have tickled Karloff.

"There is poor Mr. MacGonigle tied up there," she said.

Willie looked at the trussed flunkey. Nothing had ever been tied up more thoroughly, not even a trust fund.

"He been here all this time?" Willie asked.

"Of course," the little doll snapped. "And I know my detective stories. I didn't disturb a thing."

"Glub-ug!" the butler said.

"That is not a Scotch dialect," Willie said.

"He is gagged, you lunkhead," Penelope Paisley sniffed. "Are you a detective?"

"The bonner fide ones are on their way," Willie explained. "You got me by mistake."

"I figgered that when you got here," the old girl countered. "Have patience, MacGonigle, they'll be here any minute to untie you."

Willie was lolling on a horsehair sofa when Satchelfoot Kelly and his men arrived. Kelly snarled at the private snooper and threatened to make Willie take his name out of the phone book.

"I pay my telephone bills," Willie said. "Everybody makes mistakes."

"You been robbed?" Kelly asked Penelope.

"Why, no! I been havin' a scavenger hunt. We play like this often, me and my butler. When are the real police comin'?"

Willie Klump went into stitches.

"Well—er—were they valuable, what was took?" Satchelfoot went on, picking up a bronze statue and looking nasty at Willie.

"What do you think? They only belonged to Catherine the Great of Russia once. Ivan the Terrible give 'em to her." The ancient eccentric sniffed.

"We all have forgot somethin'," Willie offered. "Don't you think the butler would like to git loose?"

"First I got to look at him as he is," Kelly said. "Huh, quite a knot on his noggin. The intruder used more than a banana on him. Untie him, men."

The detectives had to cut MacGonigle loose. They ungagged him and Penelope ran out and came back with a bottle all covered with cobwebs. "I bet that is pre-war," Satchelfoot said.

"For once you are right," Penelope said. "My grandfather bought it when Lincoln was elected. This should revive MacGonigle."

The butler took a heavy snort, worked his arms and legs to get back into circulation, then dropped into a chair.

"Awright, start in from the beginnin'," Kelly said.

"Well," Willie said. "This is not like in books. This time how could the butler of done it?"

"You shut up, Klump, or we'll throw you down the cellar stairs!" Satchelfoot howled. "Go on, MacGonigle."

"Le's see now. Yeah, I was in the lib'ary here sortin' out some books last night about eleven when somebody walks in quiet as a mouse. At first I think it is Penelope—Miss Paisley. But when I turn my head I see it is a burglar. I always kept a gun over on the shelf in the corner, so I was ready for him. He was quick as a cat, though, and was springin' at me when I fired. I missed him, an' then somethin' hits me on the head, and when I come to, I am tied in a chair. That's all I know."

"I come in late from a D.A.R. meetin'," Miss Paisley said. "I went right upstairs and went to bed and it wa'n't until ten o'clock this mornin' I come down and found MacGonigle."

Satchelfoot stroked his chin and then asked the butler to show him where he stood when he fired off the Betsy. MacGonigle got up and went over in a corner. He kicked his foot against something and was about to stoop down and retrieve it when Satchelfoot warned him.

"If that's the Roscoe, an' I see it is now, you keep your mitts off it!"

Willie Klump watched MacGonigle go through some pantomime. Satchelfoot Kelly walked over to the moldy portieres and finally located a hole that never had been made by a moth. And from that moment things got so complicated that Willie Klump's head buzzed like a bee farm.

THE hole in the drapes was nearly six feet from the floor. Satchelfoot went into the next room and found bloodstains on the floor. He jumped back into the library.

"You didn't miss the burglar like you thought!" he yelled at the butler.

"But you shot at him in here, didn't you?" Willie asked.

"Sure," MacGonigle said.

"So he didn't bleed until he got in the middle of that parlor in there, hah?" William Klump scoffed. "Maybe he could suspend his animating and stop his heart at will."

"I pass," the butler said, and pawed at his bony face. "You got me there, awright."

"Willie, you keep out of this or—"

"An' how could you of hit the burglar in the first place, Mac?" the president of the Hawkeye insisted. "To of nicked him in the flesh, he would have to of been eight foot tall. So there is a clue, Kelly. A circus freak is the suspect. Why is it I always have to start you off on the right foot?"

"You'll git my foot in a minute, you mushmouth!" Kelly raved.

"You got to admit the guy is right, Kelly," a cop said.

"Are you on my side or his, McNinney?" Satchelfoot pouted.

"Well, somebody better get the culprit!" Penelope Paisley snapped. "I was only robbed of a quarter of a million worth of jewels. Maybe you think they grow on privet hedges!"

Satchelfoot gasped. "W—was they insured?"

"No. So do somethin' right away."

Satchelfoot's nerves acted up. "Stop

scratchin' your head, Willie. You make more noise when you—"

"That is just some rats in the woodwork," Penelope sniffed.

"Maybe one wearin' shoes is hidin' in there with 'em," Willie said.

"Where is the safe?" Kelly asked suddenly.

"Huh, I wondered how long it would be before you thought to ask," the wrinkled doll said. "It is in the wall out in the parlor behind my dear brother's picture."

Willie followed the cops into the next room. The picture of Penelope's brother was leaning against the wall, sideburns and all. An iron door swung open. There was a high chair standing against the wall under the gaping square hole in the faded wallpaper.

"Photograft everythin', men!" Satchelfoot yelled. "Now we're gettin' somewheres. The guilty citizen stood on that old chair to reach the safe an' maybe left a footprint."

Willie Klump sat down near an old étagère, and wondered why he tried to think of something all of a sudden. However, whatever thought had occurred to him ducked back out of sight in one of his few brain cells. He digressed, thought of a citizen named Plochnitz, the new blue serge suit he was going to purchase with the first dividend from Atomizers, Inc.

He was definitely atomized himself for the next few minutes while Satchelfoot and his men combed Penelope's old pueblo. Satchelfoot's cry of triumph scattered his fogginess. Willie got up and hurried out into the library.

"Who did it?" he yelped.

"While you was asleep as usual, I got a suspect," Kelly said. "We found the gas man's book and pencil right at the head of the stairs leadin' to the cellar. He better prove he dropped it some other time than last night. He could of carried it along so's if he got caught in the house he could say he forgot to read the meter and come back to do it. If he has been shot any place, he is cooked. If the boys in the lab can tell the blood we got a sample of comes out of the gas man—"

"He could have an alibi where he was last night," Willie said.

"He better," Kelly snapped. "We're goin' after him right now. I bet we got this solved, Miss Paisley!"

"I got my doubts," the old doll said.

"Shake on that." Willie grinned, and Penelope did.

"Awright," Kelly huffed. "I'll show you septics."

Willie did not bother going along with the cops. It sounded too pat all around. He went back uptown to his office and proceeded to forget about the jewel robbery. He had a missing person to find.

That afternoon the papers said Kelly was holding one Elmore Boody for questioning in connection with the big robbery on Twentieth Street. The gas man, according to Satchelfoot, could not prove where he was while the outrage was perpetrated. He couldn't or wouldn't.

Once, Boody told the cops, he had suffered from amnesia. The only thing that puzzled the law was the fact that there was not a scratch on the suspect. Kelly promised he would make Boody confess all, however, within a day or two.

"Huh," Willie said. "I better write some things down. Like if the butler missed when he fired at the burglar, how could he have drawn blood? An' how the wounded citizen waited until he got in the parlor to start bleedin'. And he would have had to of been bleedin' while he tied MacGonigle up, as it must of took him quite some time. If the gas man was somewhere else at the time, why cant' he say he was? Maybe Satchelfoot is right for oncet, as nobody can be wrong forever."

Willie, after he had noted these thoughts in an old case-book, turned his attention to the disappearance of Elbert Eely. He asked himself where he would go if he was a disheartened Thespian, and tried to think of a likely place. He remembered the colored gentleman who had found a mule that had been lost when all other searchers had given up, because he had figured where he would go if he was a mule, and went there, and there the mule was.

"I don't think that would work," Willie sighed, and struck off on another tangent just as the phone rang.

"Hello," Willie said.

"You dope! Of all the lame-brained crackpots! I heard about that stock, Willie Klump! You muddle-skulled stooge for a village idiot! I thought you was the mos' beetle-brained gland case before, but now—"

"Wrong number," Willie gulped, and hung up. "Gertie must of waited to think up all of them insults before she

buzzed me. I wisht I was sure she wa'n't right, though. Oh, well."

Willie Klump slept fitfully that night wishing a man with a mustache and a mole would stop sitting on his chest every time he dropped off.

He was pulling on his blue serge pants at eight a. m. when the landlady yelled his name. He went down in the hall and picked up the receiver and heard Satchelfoot's excited voice.

"Start all over," Willie said. "Or wait until you finish eatin' the banana!"

"The cops up in the Bronx picked up a stiff, Willie. Who you think it was?"

"Hitler? I told everybody he wa'n't dead."

"No, no, Willie!" Kelly yelled. "It was MacGonigle, that butler, who was tied up. I don't get it, Willie.'"

"For heaven's sake!" Willie choked out. "They could of rubbed him out easier las' night, couldn't they?"

"They got him in the morgue, Willie. I . . . Why am I telling you about it? I've been so excited an' upset I don't know what I'm doin'. You keep out of this thing!"

"You wont' let me, it looks like," Willie retorted.

The president of the Hawkeye Detective Agency was curious. He hurried to the morgue, and who was already there looking at the remains of MacGonigle but Penelope Paisley!

"It's him, the poor man," the spinster gulped, and reached into her old reticule for a nose doily. "Oh, hello, Mr. Krump. Who would want to murder such a faithful servant?"

"I wisht I knew," Willie said, and kept looking at the physiognomy of the corpse, and wondering about a certain little blemish thereon.

"Would you please see me home, Mr. Frump?" Penelope requested. "I'm so nervous and all. A maniac is at large."

Willie took the old doll downtown. He was about to take his leave of her after he had gone in the house, when he saw some old clothes piled up on an old sofa in the hall.

"Don't tell me you are disposin' of the butler's duds so soon, Miss Paisley?" he queried, eyeing her askance.

"Oh, those are old clothes that MacGonigle got together to give to the poor Europeans," Penelope said. "You even suspect me, don't you, Krump?"

"Klump is the name," Willie said. "Er—I'll take these over to where they're shipped out if you want. Why, this blue suit is the color I wear. He had good taste, didn't he?"

"That will be wonderful," the spinster said. "Thanks for thinkin' of it."

"Not at all," Willie said, and left.

He felt elated for a change, told himself that charity begins at home. Maybe there would be a few alterations, but it would be a saving of forty bucks, even if he'd had forty to save. When he got to his room, he made sure the pockets of the hand-me-down were empty. They were, save a slip of paper that was part of a letterhead advertising a place called "The Excelsior A.A. 1987 Second Avenue."

ON THE paper MacGonigle had evidently scrawled:

Jiving Jane—Hialeah. 20-1

"That is race track talk," Willie said. "Why, I bet the butler played the hayburners. He got in deep an' owed some tough boy a load of cabbage an' . . But he was the one tied up! This gets worst all the time H-m-m, Excelsior A.A. I wonder if there are birds of a feather there. Well, for oncet I am not goin' to stick my neck into no door of a mortuary an' say yoo-hoo, here I am for keeps. I will pack a Betsy."

The weapon was over at his office so Willie scooted over there and pulled at a drawer of the file cabinet that took a notion to go on strike. Willie yanked and nearly pulled the whole works over on top of him and a lot of magazines, mostly comics, piled up on the floor at his feet.

He was picking them up when he recognized the old copy of *Variety,* the journal devoted to the activities of Thespians.

"Huh, I forgot all about it," Willie said. "I wonder why Buff left it."

He sat down and riffled the pages, came to a place marked with pencil It was an ad and it said:

OPEN FOR ENGAGEMENTS.
Squirmerhorn
&
Eely
Escape Artists, Ext'y.

The fine print had let it be known that Elbert Eely was a wonder, even in reverse. He could truss himself up as

easily as he could release himself from any kind of cord known to the trade. He was a two-way wonder who had performed for crowned heads.

"What do you know?" Willie mumbled. "Fancy that? Wha-a? He can tie himself up? No, I don't believe it. I shouldn't think on the spur of a moment! But—but—but— That corpse at the frozen cadaver plant, there was a spot over one of the eyes. No, even this couldn't happen to me. Oh, I know mustaches an' moles can be took off, but—"

Willie went over to the window and got some fresh air. Then he went over to the file cabinet and found a Roscoe he had purchased from a G.I. Ten minutes later he was on his way to the Excelsior A.A.

Willie appraised the building carefully before he took action. The Excelsior A.A. was on the second floor, above a delicatessen store. He looked harmless enough as he stood there, and so a flashy-looking individual sauntered up to him and mentioned that it was a nice day.

"Sure is," Willie said.

"You figurin' on goin' upstairs, pal? Bet you just got in town."

"Why—er—not exactly," Willie said.

"Okay, so le's be friends, huh? Want to lay a little bet, Hiram?"

"Uh—er—I would if it is goin' to win," Willie said, acting much dumber than he actually was.

"Follow me, Buster," the come-on said. "I can pick winners nine out of ten times."

"Well, awright," Willie said.

He trailed the gee up a flight of steps and into a big room where several rough characters were sitting. There was a counter along a wall and it was lined with telephones. There was a board on the wall with the names of bangtails and the races they were running in.

"Sit down, kid," the rough boy said. "I'll get Nick Lutzig an' interduce you."

"I'm crazy to meet him,' Willie said, and meant it.

A few moments later, a squat taxpayer, wearing a plaid gray suit and checkered shirt came toward Willie. The gee limped noticeably and cold chills began to run along Willie's bones close to the marrow.

"Hiya, pal. Winky says you want to make yourself some dough. Why don't you come in my private office an' have a drink first? I always like the personal touch an' like to git acquainted with my customers."

"Yeah, it is more clubby, ain't it?" Willie gulped.

He followed Nick into a back room. So crooks were smart, were they? They didn't know from nothing, believe, Willie. He sat down and Nick locked the door.

"Well, flatfoot, you should have had more sense than to just come an' ast fer a slug!" Nick growled. "You think we take chances? We've got every bull in this town cased, even you private dicks. Okay. What do you know, Klump?"

"I know I should of stood in bed," Willie choked out.

"Of courst you know they'll find you in the river tomorrer or nex' day," Nick said. "How did you happen to come here so soon after that job over on Twentieth Street, huh?"

"Seein' as I will get shot anyways, what can I lose by answerin'?" Willie said. "That bullet MacGonigle fired nicked you, huh? Nick. Your name on it. Not bad. Ha!"

"Yeah. An' I still don't know how he knew I was standin' on that chair gettin' at the safe. But he lets go with a gat without even comin' into the room. That gee was hard of hearin', too, an' I don't think he knew I was there. I am sure as all get-out puzzled, Klump."

"So you got the jewels, huh?"

"Not the first time," Nick smirked. "The safe was empty. So I knew MacGonigle had got to 'em first an' double-crossed us. That punk got into us deep bettin' on the nags an' we threatened to tell the old dame, and he told us how we could all come out on top if we'd hold off."

"An' you figured to get the rocks all by yourself, too," Willie said. "You was crossin' your pals up, too. Won't there ever be no honor among crooks?"

"Yeah." Nick grinned. "I still can't figure how he shot me, though. And it's got me gaga about his bein' tied up an' gagged like he was. Well, anyway, we tagged him when he sneaked out of that house, an' knocked him off. We only got about ten grand worth of rocks offen him, though."

"It is quite a puzzle, isn't it?" Willie said. "I am startin' to add up a little, though. Funny how good your mind works when you are close to gettin' the final curtain. Here I got a missin' person

I was hired to look for, but he'll git buried before I get paid, an' I'll get buried before I can tell his old pal. Life is complicated, ain't it?"

"Too bad, Klump," Nick said. "You ain't a bad guy personal. But you see why I got to rub you out, don't you?"

"You couldn't do nothin' else. Let's see if we can reach an agreement, huh?"

Nick Lutzig polished the barrel of his Roscoe with a handkerchief.

"No use," he said. "You might as well try an' make a deal with Russia, Klump. Of courst you know you got frisked of that gat the minute you got inside, don't you?"

"I did?" Willie gulped, reached for his pocket, and found it as empty as his midriff.

"Winky lifted a bass viol out of a night club orchestra oncet, and nobody knew it," Nick said. "The place was packed, too. I got a hunch MacGonigle was tryin' to sell those sparklers a little bit at a time, an' the rest are still hid in his room."

"I would say that," Willie mumbled, and looked for an out.

He could not see one and he looked back at the gun Nick was fondling, and suddenly Willie's ears quivered and his teeth snapped together. He remembered what he had forgotten.

"Yeah, your Roscoe, Klump," Nick grimaced. "Kraut Walther, huh? I never believe in shootin' two guys twice with the same gat. Makes the cops work harder!"

Willie got up and charged like a cornered rhino.

"It ain't loaded, you crook!" he yelped.

"That trick is older than—"

Nick Lutzig aimed at Willie and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

"Why, you wasn't kiddin'!"

He took Willie's noggin in his solar plexus just as he screeched for his reserves. Willie got him as he bounced off the wall and hugged him to him just as the door broke open.

"Awright, you punks!" Willie flung in the teeth of three gorillas. "Start shootin' and work your way to me through Nick's grisket!"

Willie Klump did not think they would, but they did. A bullet tore through the plaid at Nick's shoulder and stung Willie's right ear-lobe. Nick, his marbles back, screamed bloody murder.

"You wouldn't shoot me, Winky?"

"Oh, wouldn't I?" the mug mocked, and was getting closer to make sure of a vital spot when there was a battering and crashing sound in both the front and rear of the building.

"The cops!" a bull-like voice roared.

Glass splintered and partitions caved in. There were shots.

"A raid!" Nick gulped. "I lose anyways."

Willie flung the dishonest citizen right at the cops when they burst into the office.

"For oncet," Willie said, "you snails was on the ball. This is Nick Lutzig who killed MacGonigle, the butler. MacGonigle robbed that safe of Penelope's. It is lucky I forget so easy or you could just as well have forgot to raid this joint today anyway. Who carries aspirin with them?"

"It's that Willie Klump," a cop said.

"Search this joint for some jewels before you go," Willie said, and sat down to loosen his nerves. "I got to phone."

WILLIE picked one up, and a voice at the other end said:

"Hold your rompers on, Nick. They ain't even at the post for the third yet."

Willie decided to call Satchelfoot from the precinct house. . . .

"It was this way," Willie Klump explained later, with a D.A. and three assistants, and Satchelfoot Kelly looking on with lower jaws drooping. "MacGonigle got to playin' the hayburners but picked too many goats and was in hock to Nick Lutzig and his hoods. So to escape being ventilated he made a deal, but decided to cross the illegal citizens, at about the same time Nick decided to cross him. I happen to know MacGonigle used to be Elbert Eely, escape artist, and could tie himself up solo. Well, the butler took the sparklers out of the safe, took them upstairs and stashed them. Then, seeing that Penelope Paisley was out to the D.A.R. he had plenty of time to stage the phony burglary."

"I need some digitalis," Satchelfoot gulped.

"What for?" Willie needled. "You never had a heart. As I was sayin'—now, the butler come downstairs an' fired off a gun at random, but happened to hit Nick who had come in meanwhile. Nick was standin' on a chair, openin' the safe an' findin' somebody had beat him to it when he got shot. He lams, but Mac-

Gonigle don't hear him, as the butler is a little deef. Well, MacGonigle tosses the gun to the floor, whangs himself over the coco with a book-end or somethin', then gags himself and trusses himself up.

"You already know how I got a new suit an' found evidence the butler played the nags, an' how I started thinkin' when I saw the little white spot over the eye of the corpse. He'd had a mole took off. MacGonigle was on his way to convert part of his loot into lettuce when Nick and his pals rubbed him out. You found the rest of the jewels in the guy's room, huh? No wonder butlers are always suspects in them books, huh?"

Satchelfoot Kelly loosened his tie, unbuttoned his shirt collar.

"Water—water!" he gasped.

"Well, why didn't the gas man give us an alibi if he was innocent?" the D.A. fretted.

"I wouldn't know," Willie said. "Maybe he was just stubborn. Maybe gas men meet lots of lonesome wives in their business. Some wives have husbands who would just as soon strangle you as not."

"You get a thousand dollars from the old babe for a reward," the D.A. said.

"Yeah," Willie said. "Let any wise guy try and sell me no more stock whicht has no horns on it. I also git three C's from the late butler's old partner, Humphrey Buff. So if you'll excuse me I will go an' call him up."

"How does he do it, Kelly?" the D.A. asked, in a froggy voice. "He never uses no mirrors. Maybe it is because he knows he is stupid but won't admit it."

"That don't make sense," Satchelfoot sighed. "But what does when Willie works? You got anythin' to drink handy?"

William Klump dragged the world by the tail as he went to his office the next morning. The phone was ringing when he walked in. He answered it, expecting to hear Gertie's humble apologies. But a male voice twanged his eardrum.

"Mr. Klump? Say, this is Draper of the F.B.I. Want to congratulate you. Don't be surprised if you get a letter from Mr. Hoover any day now. He'll want you to go to work for him maybe."

"Who you tryin' to kid this time?" Willie sniffed. "He is not president no more an' couldn't hire nobody. You call up the aquarium if you want to talk to an easy fish. G'bye!"

Willie clenched his teeth. This was one day he would live through without getting taken in.

The door opened suddenly. Before Willie could spin around in his chair, Gertrude Mudgett had crossed the floor and was in his lap and throwing her arms around his neck.

"Oh, Willie, you are wonderful! The papers said you—"

There was a flash of light that made Willie blink, and there was no thunderstorm going on anywhere on the Atlantic seaboard.

"Yeah, hold it!" a voice said. "It's a natural!"

"Pitchers!" Willie screeched. "I been compermised. It is a badger's game!"

He jumped up, and Gertie Mudgett slid off his lap and sat down hard on the floor.

"You give me them plates!" Willie yelled, but the photographers were already jumping into the elevator when he got out into the corridor.

Willie stormed back to his office. "You —you adventurish!" he yelled at Gertie.

"I never had nothin' to do with it, Willie Klump," the Mudgett protested. "But what a break for me, ha! I'll order six of the snaps, an' when you think you want to cast me aside . . . Willie, why do you act so cold at times?"

"If you got into hot water as much as I did, you'd want a change," William Klump yelped, and picked up the phone.

He gave the operator the first number that came in his head.

"Hello, hello, Mr. Miffnish? About that fugitive you want me to shadow up in the Yukon. I'll take it. Be there right away. G'bye!"

He snatched up his hat and ran out of the office. Gertie's shrill voice turned the corner and followed him to the elevator.

"Willie, you can't go dressed like that! You'll freeze up there with just—er . . . Why that dirty fakir!"

She went after Willie.

On the other side of town, an undertaker banged down his telephone, and scratched his noggin. The thing that puzzled him the most was the fact that his name *was* Miffnish.

Next Issue: Willie Klump in THE MOURNING AFTER, by Joe Archibald

TOO MANY COPS

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

Sheriff Joe Zeller's knowledge of nature lore comes in mighty handy when he goes in pursuit of a dangerous, elusive killer!

CHAPTER I

The Pines

BIG Joe Zeller got down from his beat-up Chevvie in front of the "The Pines" and saw the crowd waiting there for him at the entrance to the main building. Even from where he had parked in the arc of gravel driveway, he saw the knowing grins of a few of them.

Sheriff Zeller looked strangely like his Chevvy. He was nearly as big, and certainly his rumpled, faded suit bore a resemblance to the rumple-fendered automobile. And both had definitely seen their more active days, as Clem Jayson never tired of saying of Zeller.

"They said the body is in back, in Cabin Number Eight," "Buddy" Gill said.

Buddy had climbed out ahead of his chief, but stood waiting for Sheriff Zeller to lead the way. He frowned.

"You see them black boys a-beating at that brush fire?" Buddy asked.

Joe Zeller looked at the neat tourist cabins and restaurant layout that was the Pines, and almost wished he'd thought of it instead of Jake Hargey. Jake had sure made a good thing of the Pines, all right.

South Cape was ideal for a setup like this. When you were finished up with the summer crowd from the mainland, it came along ducking season. When that was petering out, would come the Northerners beating it for Florida to get away from the cold, and beating it back again in a few months to get away from the heat.

The Pines sold "Clean Homelike Beds, Antiques, China, Art, Gasoline & Oil, and Meals." Generally, the food was good, and the service by competent Negro help was good. But if things slipped up and someone at Jake Hargey's Pines got a bum meal, or an unmade bed, or a phony antique, it didn't drive Jake out of business.

That way, as well as the money, running a tourist stopover was a whole lot different from being a sheriff! One slip-up in twenty-nine years—and out you went like a used tobacco cud. *Floop!*

It was all very nice, the Pines. The highway split South Cape like a cement channel, furrowing the tall pines exactly center between the bay and the ocean. And the Pines grazed richly on the constant travel that flowed over the highway, cunningly located between Oracook and Glenby, so that the southbound travelers wanted to pause and rest before the long ferry trip across the water and on south. The northbound travelers wanted to pause and rest after the ferry trip, and spring off fresh in the morning for home.

THE main building housed the office, the restaurant, and the tables and cases and shelves laden with merchandise that was good to have and easy to carry along in an automobile. Behind the main building, in a half-moon semicircle, were the snug, trim cabins with hot water, electricity, showers, and modern in every particular.

Buddy Gill eyed the waiting crowd with the apprehension of a man who has run the gauntlet and knows he is again about to run it, and doesn't like it. He

A COMPLETE CRIME ACTION NOVELET

"Old Mose saw you lift that honey from the counter"

shuffled his big feet nervously.

"You see them black boys, chief?" he repeated. "Looked like they was stomping out a brush fire. What do you figure they are doing?"

Joe Zeller took off his battered hat, smoothed the carefully dispersed gray hair evenly onto his balding dome, and squashed the black felt back on again.

"I reckon they are stomping out a brush fire," he murmured, his voice patient. "Only, it ain't a brush fire, because there ain't any brush in the center of the cabins. And they ain't stomping it out, they're beating it out with brooms. I reckon why they are doing it is, there was a fire, and they don't want it to get to the cabins, or to the automobiles in the attached garages. Come on, Bud, we'll see how it is."

Jake Hargey told them how it was, his reedy voice shrill with excitement. His telling was apparently by authority of ownership of the Pines, because his tousled hair, tieless collar and sleep-bleared eyes indicated he'd only just got out of bed himself.

"Number Eight is dead—murdered!" he piped shrilly.

Guests might have names, but to Hargey they were numbers. Number One was checking out. Number Five needed soap. Now, Number Eight was dead.

"He's a foreigner," Hargey hurried on, "come to duck-shoot with a party of seven others. A careless smoker started a fire in the pine needles and leaves in the center clearing was what led to him being found. Mose, my old dishwasher, seen the fire when he come to work. Just a slow, smoldering fire that had already eaten its way across the clearing.

"The smoke of it was blowing into the open screens of Seven and Eight, and he went to tell them it wasn't nothing, but to lower their windows. Eight didn't

answer, so he fixed a flashlight onto him, from outside. He seen him dead, with the knife sticking out of his back."

Joe Zeller nodded, his eyes on the group behind Hargey. Bill Dane, one of the assistants at the Pines, Clem Jayson, publisher of the local *News*, a wide-eyed, curious group of early-risen transients, and behind them old Mose, his hair as white as his rolling eyes.

It wasn't quite seven o'clock. Zeller stared at the State Police car parked in the driveway, then turned his gaze onto Jayson.

"It was me called the State Police," Jayson said, lowering his leonine head to peer at the sheriff through bifocals. "Dodd and Bellew are in charge. They're back there now. Nicky Dodd insisted on calling you. He thought you at least ought to know."

Joe's steady gaze held Jayson's a long moment. The publisher of the South Cape *News*, a weekly, licked his lips.

"The missus is sick," he said, "so I been eating breakfast here for a week now. That's how come I'm here."

Joe Zeller shrugged, moved his head when a fly buzzed persistenly close.

"I didn't ask you about your business, Clem," he said softly. He looked at Hargey. "Is the corpse a real foreigner, or just an out-of-county man?" He slapped again at the fly.

"New Yorker," Clem said emphatically. "Got here last night. They sort of whooped it up a bit, and decided to sleep late and start huntin' tomorrow."

JOE ZELLER nodded, ducked his head, and his hand flashed out in a swift movement. The fly stopped flying, but buzzed louder than ever. Zeller held the thing between a gnarled index finger and thumb. He frowned.

"*Musca domestica*," he said, absently. "Ordinary house fly. Have a few hot days and back they come!" He released the fly again. "Where is the corpse's party? They all up?"

"Some yes, some no," Hargey said. "Those as is, they're eating. Those as ain't, are still nursing the big heads, I reckon."

Zeller nodded. "Come along, Buddy." He circled around back.

Hargey stood thinking about it. "It ain't safe," he muttered. "Just him and Buddy Gill and a few constables to pertect us. And the State Police. They're mainly for speeding violation."

"We need more police, and better police!" Clem Jayson said. "Huh! You see old Zeller examining flies, and a murdered man lies out back here? Zeller has been in twenty-nine years! Too long for any one man. He's old, he's old-fashioned."

"Another year and he'll be retired," Hargey offered.

Jayson's eye-glasses flashed in the early sun. "He isn't going to be sheriff next year. Not while the South Cape *News* is a power! We would have had him out before this, but figured to let his term run out. He won't be elected again. Not after that disgrace he visited on us, making a laughing-stock of South Cape all over the land!"

"Poor Joe!" Jake Hargey answered as he grinned. "Sendin' out a seven-state alarm for a man that had been dead a year! Still, Clem, you got to admit them storekeepers and filling-station men swore it was him that was holding them up. They identified his police photographs."

"They never should have been shown a photo of a man known to be dead twelve months, Jake," the newspaperman said. "Joe slipped up. It's tough, a year away from his pension. But policing is a tough business all the way around. He's got a little farm. He won't exactly starve. Not if he works it real hard. Jake, he just doesn't fit in as a smart, heads-up sheriff."

Hargey found an old pipe and tamped some cheap tobacco into it.

"Still, it's tough lines," he said, after he had puffed it going. "Tough lines. Have another cup of coffee, Clem?"

The publisher shook his head, his eyes going around the group of them still there.

"The paper comes out in three days," he said. "I got a whole lot to do yet, writing up this murder. *And* saying a few things I got to say." He nodded vigorously, as if he were already saying those things, in his mind. "A lot of things to say!"

"Poor Joe," Jake Hargey murmured, as he turned back inside, the group making way for him. "Poor Joe!"

One of the tourists laughed as he followed Hargey back into the dining-room.

"Hey, that's right! Remember—the backwoods sheriff who had everybody looking for that bandit already dead all

that time? Yep, this is him! I remember, now. Sheriff Zeller!"

In back, Zeller nodded to the young State Troopers.

"Hello, Nicky. How's the new baby? How are you, Hal? You get that orchard of fig trees planted?"

His eyes were going slowly around the place, missing nothing. They touched on Number Eight's closed door a moment, then went back to where the Negroes were watching the ash-white area that made a front hem all around the cabins.

"How long had that been burning?" he asked.

"Old Mose saw it when he came through the pines on his way to work," Nicky Dodd told it. He scratched his smooth jaw with a big, blond-haired hand. "There's nothing but needles there, so he figured it was better to let it burn out slow, that way, than wake everybody up. Then the smoke started getting bad."

"You see the corpse?" Zeller asked. "Been dead long?"

"Mr. Zeller," Dodd said, "all I did was make sure he *was* dead. Then I telephoned you. Me and Hal just ordered everybody to keep clear of here, but not to leave. Same for the hotel guests, too."

CHAPTER II

White Ants

THE hotel was a three-story clapboard structure that stood deeper in the pine grove, beyond the semicircularly arranged cabins. Nine more double rooms were available there and usually filled.

A new circle of cabins was in course of being built behind the present cabins. With the owner's cottage across the highway, and flanked by those smaller ones of Jake Hargey's two assistants, the Pines was assuming the proportions of a little town all its own.

That death had put its cold hand on the bustling industry of this hive of transient activity was apparent in Joe Zeller's next words.

"Post a sign out front, facing both ways, saying 'Temporarily Closed,' Nicky," the sheriff said. "Bill Dane can letter. Get him to do it. The coroner, Doc Knox, is on the way. Everybody that is here now stays here—until we clear 'em. Hotel, cabins, all. I contacted my other deputy and the township constables to stop by, in case we had something for them." He paused. "Thanks for waiting."

Dodd and Bellew kept their embarrassed eyes on the Negroes. They were beating the needles at the boardwalk's curving rim. The center area had long since burned clean, and was now overlaid with a layer of white ashes, clean as a blanket of snow.

Bellew cleared his throat and moved his feet.

"We figured it was only right," he mumbled.

Zeller nodded. "If you'll get Bill Dane started on that sign, Nicky, and then come back? Hal, Buddy and I will start looking over things."

The dead man was lying on his left side, his sightless eyes open to the painted stucco wall. The husky, shortish body was partly clad, a blood-stained, wool dressing-gown revealing undershirt and shorts. Expensive wool socks, and wool-lined moccasins, were on the feet.

The black haft of a hunting knife protruded from the short ribs of the man's back, on the left side.

Zeller stood at the foot of the bed, his eyes taking in the well-cut, graying hair, the square jaw that was now slack, disclosing several gold upper teeth, the square hands with strong, manicured nails.

"Looks to be maybe forty-some, and able to take care of himself," Zeller observed to the other two. "Up to now, anyway."

He stooped and peered under the bed and saw why there wasn't more gore visible at first glance. The blood had coursed down the man's back and into the bedclothes and through the mattress to the floor.

He straightened, his eyes going slowly over the room. In a corner stood two shotgun cases, apparently not yet opened. Boxes of shells were stacked neatly by the case stocks, on the floor. A strapped, closed suitcase flanked the bureau. Another lay open, its contents of lumberjack shirts, underwear, gloves,

socks, boots, caps, handkerchiefs, corduroy trousers, stacked in neat piles on a chair and the dresser.

Zeller took the four steps along the room to look in at the bathroom. Shaving kit and bottled lotions and hair pomade were neatly placed on the basin shelf, and in the open medicine chest.

"Might be a sneak thief tried to get his money, and he surprised the criminal," Zeller murmured. "We'll have to get his party together for questioning, see if they know about what money he carried, or jewelry, and then check back. But before touching the corpse, I want pictures of everything."

Buddy Gill blinked and went into his pockets for pencil and notebook.

"Pictures," he repeated. "Okay."

"Fingerprints of the knife, the doorknobs, on both sides, desk top, dresser, the towel he seems to have been gagged with."

BELLEW and Buddy looked at the sheriff.

"There's no towel in his mouth," the trooper said.

Zeller pointed. "There, under his chin. See it? A small towel, wadded up into a ball. Looks like he was near dead when he was able to spit the thing out. Too weak to call for help. My idea is, the slayer maybe held it in his mouth while the knife stab took its full effect, then let up. There may be prints. Lot of blood on one side of that balled towel, anyway."

"Want us to handle the photographing and fingerprinting, as usual?" Bellew asked.

"Yes," Zeller said. "And fast. Before the coroner moves the body in his examination of it. We got to work fast, because if a thief got to him we'll want to know what he got. His party should be able to tell us. Buddy? Go tell Old Mose I want to see him. We'd better move outside, Hal. Old Mose wouldn't come in this death cabin for a million dollars!"

Shortly Buddy came back with the aged Negro, his pace slowed to the reluctant one of the old dishwasher. Zeller moved away from the cabin to meet him.

"What time did you come on the job, Mose?"

"Five-thirty, suh," the man muttered. "Ah seen it then, the fire."

"You knew it didn't amount to anything, and decided not to wake the guests. But when dawn came, and a slight wind with it to blow the smoke into Seven and Eight, you decided to let them know?" At the Negro's quick, nervous nod, Zeller asked, "Was the door closed, Mose? Locked, at that time? You tried it?"

"Closed," the man said in a frightened voice. "Ah didn't try the do' after I seen—*it!* Ah run hollerin' fo' Mistuh Bill, an' he done come to look through the window. An' then Mistuh Jayson, he were a-rising, an' he took charge."

Zeller winked at Bellew. "He sure took charge! Now, Mose—" He interrupted himself, his eyes coming to attention on the rim of the slightly raised boardwalk there in front of Cabin Eight. "Well, look at that now!"

He stepped onto the latticed boards and squatted on his haunches, his eyes intent. A column of whitish ants stretched from the rim of the boards back into the fire-whitened area. Thousands and thousands of the small, colonizing insects were marching, marching, marching—a visible moving wave of motion in the otherwise still, white area.

Bellew and Buddy Gill came to stand beside him, the Negro remaining where he was, but watching them closely. The State Trooper blinked.

"Well, I'll be dogged!" he said. "White ants. Look at 'em! Must be thousands of 'em!'

"No, heck, not white ants," Zeller answered. "They are the *Lasius* variety. Ground ants. They colonize, like bees; but the *Lasius* live underground, maybe a foot under. They have long tunnels and chambers, sometimes as long as five hundred feet. They are black ants, but just now white from that pine-needle ash."

Buddy looked behind him. "Look like they know the corpse is there, and they are marching to it!" He shivered a bit, his pale eyes wide. "They—they don't go for blood?"

"Not these," Zeller said. "You might say ants are bees without wings. They live on nectar from flowers, like bees. And sap from various plants. They're the most intelligent of all insects, and are said to have reasoning powers second only to man."

Bellew grinned. "Maybe they're running because they know there has been a killing?" But he sobered quickly.

"The fire burned them out, Sheriff."

"That's right." Zeller nodded. "And they're going out by the shortest route. Straight under Cabin Eight."

The sheriff came to his feet, his eyes searching the burned area in the center, then traveling beyond it. "What do you make of the little pile of white ash—white and *black* ash—Hal? See it? By the foot of that tall pine?"

Bellew looked, then nodded. "A rag, maybe, was in the way of the flames. I—" He paused at a sudden cry. "What's wrong with Mose?"

THE old dishwasher had walked along the untouched space, staying clear of the charred area. His old eyes were narrowed as he slowly swung his head from side to side, up and down the moving column of ants. He turned to look at Sheriff Zeller and the other lawmen.

"Befo' Gawd, Ah don' want to get mixed inter dis!" he whimpered. "Ah—Ah don't know nuffin, Mistuh Joe! Don' know nuffin'! Ah tole all Ah knowed, so he'p me! Ah—Ah'm goin', Mistuh Joe, Ah'm goin'!"

The old man started to walk swiftly away, and broke into a run for the kitchen door when Bellew raised his voice to stop him.

"Let him go," Zeller said. "He just wants to get away from here! He was scared, but now he really *is* frightened!"

Bellew and the deputy-sheriff stared. "What scared him?" Buddy asked. "He was all right when he came out here."

"I think Old Mose knows who killed Number Eight, as Jake calls him," Zeller said. "I think he knows, and is frightened by his knowledge! But keep that to yourselves, both of you, or we may have another killing on our hands."

"Old Mose, you mean?" Bellew asked.

"Old Mose. I think he knows!" the sheriff said.

"Then he lied about not seeing anything?" Gill asked. "You think he saw the killer?"

"For old Mose's satisfaction, he as good as saw him! Look, Hal—that little pile of ashes by that tree, in the center? No, don't walk out there! I don't want anybody out there! Make a long pole with a scoop on the end of it, and get that pile of black-and-white ashes. Put the ashes away in a good paper sack. I'm going to rope off that entire burned area and put it under guard."

Bellew and Gill were stupefied.

"Why?" the trooper asked.

"I don't think that fire was an accident," Zeller said. "I think analysis will show that pile of ashes is—or was—a rag, saturated with gasoline, or oil. I think the area was burned to prevent us from finding footprints, shoe prints, in the pine needles and leaves. The ground was soft, a bit, with yesterday's rain, and stayed soft, although the sun and the breeze dried the leaves and needles.

"I think that whoever killed Number Eight came out of his place of concealment, avoided the boardwalk, and got to Cabin Eight across some part of that center area. Later, to be sure he hadn't left prints we could moulage, or make casts of, he soaked a rag in some inflammable liquid, lighted it, and threw it into the center area to cover up his traces with that white ash."

Bellew looked at Gill covertly. The deputy lifted his eyebrows in helpless resignation. It was a full two minutes before Bellew could find his voice:

"Yes, sir, Sheriff. Buddy and I will take care of that now. Hey, you boys!"

The workers who had been brooming out the fire looked up.

"Now, you're to keep clear of that burned area," Bellew ordered.

Bellew and Buddy went away hurriedly, as if eager to swing into some sort of action, or to get away from the keen glances of Sheriff Zeller, for the moment.

Zeller's voice reached out to caution them in mild reproof:

"But don't quote me, boys. It's only an idea. So far. It may be that I'm as just as wrong as Clem Jayson says I am."

CHAPTER III

All "Friends" Together

BEFORE nightfall, Number Eight had a name. It was Marsh Studley. He was a banker of sorts, specializing in financing small to medium-sized industries.

Before nightfall, too, Sheriff Joe Zeller was clearing all but the members of the Marsh Studley party on their way, being care-

ful first to ascertain that none of them in any way could have been connected with the New York banker. Also that they had no information to give, and that he had their names and addresses in the event anything came up at a later day, which they might assist in clearing up.

The State Troopers and Zeller's constables and deputies were standing by at their various duties, some guarding the burned area while others watched the detained members of the ill-fated hunting party. Lights had been strung about the burned area to maintain the close vigil that Joe Zeller had ordered.

All the cabins had been vacated, Zeller ordering the ducking party to the hotel to their voluble protests.

Earlier, Zeller had dispatched to Richmond, by commercial plane owned by Slim Lalley, at Oracook, the various items of evidence he had collected. The F.B.I. office there quickly had gone to work on the matter, and as a courtesy had returned Agent Mort Kittridge with their reports, and a proffer of unofficial help.

Zeller called for a meeting of the principals he had detained, in the dining room of the main building. He had met them when they arrived from the hotel, suggested they have their supper, and then he would have some questions to put to them. He had already interviewed them individually.

After a supper of soup, country ham, fresh vegatables, pie and coffee, Zeller arose and nodded to his men. Then he addressed the near table at which the seven hunters sat.

"We got a table, a long table, cleared at this other end," he said slowly. "If you gentlemen will step this way? And, after we are seated, I'll let you ask any questions that may be on your mind. Then I'll take over."

When they had all dropped into chairs, the seven duck hunters facing the county and state officials, one of the visiting group—a tall, gray-haired man in faultless county squire garb—spoke.

"Question," he said. "When do we get out of here? I'm a surgeon. Doctor Gorman Kinnerley is the name. I'm a busy man. Operations are waiting for my personal handling. Serious, important operations."

"You got here to duck shoot yesterday," Zeller said, softly. "You asked for quarters for one week. I'll try not to keep you any longer than that. But we have a murderer to find."

"Good heavens, man!" a stout, red-faced man in too-young clothes exploded. "This must have been the act of a sneak thief, a local crook. Certainly you don't think we are killers?"

"You're killers. Every one of you," Zeller replied. "That is what you came here for, isn't it? To kill ducks, I'll admit. But nevertheless, it establishes that under your own code for killing, you will act. You feel it justifiable, or necessary, or your privilege, to kill ducks. One of you, I am afraid, felt it necessary and justifiable to kill Marsh Studley."

"Ridiculous!" a man at the far end snapped. "Marsh Studley was our friend."

"I'll come to that in a minute," Zeller continued. "For now, I can tell you this: a sneak-thief didn't kill your—friend." He hesitated the barest fraction, and caught questioning looks among the hunting group. "There wasn't a single print on that knife that killed Studley. There wasn't a single fingerprint in that cabin! Not even one of Studley's own prints! Someone wiped the place clear of every print, and carefully."

"That doesn't prove a sneak-thief, a prowler, didn't do it," a man growled. "If I'm held here, I want a lawyer."

ZELLER looked at the man.

"Let's see— you're Mr. Nash Crichton. Occupied Cabin Three. Correct? I think maybe you're going to need a lawyer, Mr. Crichton." He took an envelope from the various materials he had gathered on the table. He shook a leather button, of the sports jacket type, out of the envelope. "This yours?"

Crichton's lean, dark face lost its color as he accepted the button, nodded and tossed it back.

"That's mine. I—it was missing when I got here."

"Could be," Zeller said quietly. "But it was found in Studley's cabin, and you deny having been in his cabin. Now, the button itself doesn't prove anything. Not too much. Didn't you come in Mr. Studley's car, with him driving?"

"No, I didn't," Crichton snapped. "Studley, Keith Rappleyea and I were to come in Stud's car, but—well, we switched at the last minute. I drove

with Dave Gorsline. Next me. And Ed Tedder, just opposite you."

The two men in question nodded silently.

A suave, blond man with glasses and a long, straight mouth spoke up.

"I'm Rappleyea. I'll verify what Crichton says. He wanted to talk with Gorsline about something, so he rode with him. We came in three cars, the eight of us, starting at approximately the same time. Incidentally, Mr. Zeller, I'm a lawyer admitted to practise in this state, as well as New York. I'll be happy to represent Mr. Crichton and my other friends—as well as myself—in this case."

"I'm glad you mentioned that word 'friend' again," Zeller said. "But first, are you objecting to Mr. Crichton answering questions?"

"Indeed, no," Rappleyea hastened to say, with a smile. "In fact, I think you are handling the case quite smartly. There is no objection to your detaining us a reasonable time."

"Let's see—you're Cabin One? Right?" Zeller went on. "Good. Just want to have everything straight in my mind. Now—about the friendly part of this. You are all together, that is certain. You are all acquainted and, I understand, belong to many of the same clubs. But I'd hardly say it was a thoroughly friendly party. You may like to hunt at the same time, even go the same place. But the facts I have gathered from one and another of you, *plus* information over the telephone today in a number of long-distance calls, makes me think you are sort of harping too heavy on how friendly you are—were—with Mr. Studley."

Dr. Kinnerley bridled.

"Such as, your information?"

Zeller picked up a sheet of paper.

"I'll just read off a few things. Don't stop me, but if I'm wrong about the facts, correct me. Ready?"

The men nodded. Zeller began to talk.

"Mr. Rappleyea, Cabin One. Lawyer. Handled a law case for Studley nine years ago, didn't collect his fee, swore he'd never again handle a legal matter for Studley.

"Mr. Gorsline, Cabin Two. Banker. Gave some information on a prospective loan to Studley, confidentially, and Studley undercut him on the loan.

"Mr. Crichton, Cabin Three." His eyes met the man's. "Your wife divorced you and later married Studley. You were to ride with him yesterday, and didn't. You had an argument with him last night. The button from your coat was found in his cabin. Right?"

Crichton's eyes were wary.

"I was—drinking," Crichton said. "That other—he didn't get interested in Norma, in Mrs. Crichton, I mean, Mrs. Studley, until—Oh, go ahead, Sheriff!" he finished harshly.

"Mr. Marchand, Cabin Four. Broker. Thought once Studley had cheated in a card game. Both parties cool thereafter.

"Mr. Wyants, Cabin Five. Had some trouble with Studley over the latter's unauthorized investing of certain of Mr. Wyants' funds. It all appeared legal, so Wyants didn't get any place.

"Mr. Tedder, Cabin Six. President of a small industrial firm. Introduced Mr. Studley to his managing board, and when Mr. Studley refinanced the firm he induced them to let Mr. Tedder go."

THE red-faced man smiled.

"I was angry, at the time. He did me a favor. I'm better off, now. I didn't kill him, nor do I mourn him."

"Doctor Kinnerley, Cabin Seven," Zeller said. "Performed an operation on Mrs.—er—Studley, for which he said the agreed sum was three thousand dollars. Studley gave him five hundred, and defied him to sue. Said he could not prove an agreement, that he, Studley, had the best legal advice available, and Doctor Kinnerley could go to thunder."

"Instead of which, Studley went there," the surgeon answered as he shrugged. "All right, Zeller—Studley cut the corners, but all of them legally. Quite. Every move he made, he must have consulted his lawyer. He was rich, successful. A good shot, a good poker player, offered excellent competition. He was also something else." Dr. Kinnerley said that something else, and no voice raised to deny it. "I still think a sneak-thief killed him."

"I didn't give you the medical testimony yet," The sheriff said. "Here it is—Studley was unconscious when that knife was thrust into his side. He had first received a vicious smash on the right side of his head with his own boot, wielded by the killer. That he trusted the killer, admitted him to the room, is evident from the fact he was partially dressed, evidently paused in his unpack-

ing to talk.

"He was struck down, laid on the bed, a gag held into his mouth, and then stabbed. He bled to death. Apparently nothing of his was touched. Now, sneak thieves don't operate that way. They enter, grab, run.

"If someone tries to stop them, they may strike. But they do not gain admittance to a locked cabin occupied by a big, strong man, at a late hour, and a total stranger, talk with him, and then kill him without any financial gain, wipe off their fingerprints, and leave. That door was spring-locked. Studley had his key!

"Also, gentlemen, a sneak thief does not stay around to make a fire in pine needles and leaves, for the purpose of obliterating his footprints! The F.B.I. confirms that the cleared area fire this morning was just that—intentionally set."

"Theory," Crichton snapped. "I don't know about my button, but I do know I was so—s t e w e d—last night, that I couldn't have done all that neat work you credit me with. I can prove that. I—I had an argument with Studley, yes. I—I even said I wouldn't go hunting with him that day or any other. That I remember."

"Maybe you were so drunk you don't remember anything else?"

"After what I called Studley last night, he wouldn't have let me in his cabin," Crichton insisted. "In fact, he tried to attack me! They'll tell you, everybody here. I made it quite clear that Stud and I were not friends."

Zeller stared at him a long moment. "Any special reason?"

"Maybe I was just drunk."

"Maybe?"

"Okay, I was drunk."

"When you started driving down here, too?"

"No," Crichton said, after a moment. "Later."

"What do we do now?" Rappleyea said.

"Just make yourselves as comfortable as you can," Zeller replied. "For a day or two. You can walk around, hire automobiles, anything like that you wish. Your own cars will stay where they are for the time being. I just don't want you to leave here. If you do, I think you'll agree it might tend to indicate guilt. Right?"

Crichton frowned as he spoke again.

"Are you waiting for evidence we haven't heard of yet? Or—do you expect someone will crack, will break, and confess? I mean, granted that you are right, and one of us did it, which I do not believe."

"I'm waiting for a shipment of ants," Zeller said.

CHAPTER IV

The Double Dealers

AT ZELLER'S last words there was a stunned silence. Dr. Kinnerley stirred, shook his head, looked intently at the sheriff.

"Will you say that again?" he asked.

"Ants," Joe Zeller said patiently. "Emmets. Of the variety *Lasius*. You see, we can't get any footprints that may have been made when the killer sneaked into the center area, to reach Studley's door. He didn't dare take the boardwalk route, because someone might have heard him or seen him. Well, to kill his footprints in the soft ground under the needles, maybe even to obliterate an unusual type of shoe or sole he was wearing, he set that fire. Why else? We can't get his prints. But the ants can."

Crichton was staring his disbelief.

"Is this a gag, Sheriff?"

"Ants are almost human in their reasoning," Zeller said. "They got out of their tunnels as soon as the ground cooled. Their area had been fired and was ruined. So they left. Ants travel by both smell and feel. The slightest indentation, the merest depression, is clearly felt by their elbowed head feelers.

"Those ants went out of their holes and out of their areas by the easiest route—along the footprints of the killer! Toward Cabin Eight, and also, another stream of them, toward the cabin the killer came from and returned to! We saw that trail, this morning. I am sending for ants to turn loose in that area again. And they will track straight to the cabin the killer occupied!"

Someone laughed. Not a pleasant sound. "Well, maybe that's better than

looking for a dead bandit, at that." Rappleyea murmured. "All rather far-fetched to me. I don't think that evidence will stand up in court, provided you do get the ants to track that path over again. Wherever it led to. My guess is that they will disperse in a hundred different directions the moment you loose them."

"You guess wrong," Zeller said. "The ancient Egyptians knew of the ant's ways, and made smart use of them. So did the Africans, and the Aztec Indians in Mexico. Our own F.B.I. has used this form of clue to lead them to a killer, in the Florida Everglades."

"I still think you're wrong." Rappleyea smiled. "I'll defend any man here tonight arrested by the sheriff on any such flimsy evidence—and make another laughing-stock of the gentleman. Ant detectives, indeed!"

"Everybody to his own ideas," Zeller said. "You'll see. The State Police, my deputy—and one other man—saw it today. Others may not know where the ants tracked to that first time, but I do, and so do those other men. The F.B.I. has been told, and the report is now in Richmond. If tomorrow verifies it—I think we'll start building a case."

"We can leave the premises?" Crichton asked. "I mean, we don't have to stay cooped up here tonight, or tomorrow? I'd like to see a movie, myself."

"Don't take your cars," Zeller said, "or even try to. You can walk to any part of the area you like, except that roped-off, lighted area that was burned off. Well, I guess that's all for tonight."

"Phew!" Buddy Gill, outside, said to Nicky Dodd. "You hear that?"

"Don't sell Zeller out too quick," the F.B.I. Special Agent said softly. "That man knows his woodcraft. It's interesting." But even the Federal operative was none too happy about the prospects.

It was an interested, if skeptical, group that watched the sheriff and his men lay a walk of stout boards out to the center of the burned area, next day.

"We need boards so we won't accidentally make footprints of our own for them to follow," Joe Zeller had said. "For the ants."

The boards extended at right angles from the main building, to bisect the line from the center to Cabin Eight. The F.B.I. man and the State Troopers carefully watched the several packages that contained Zeller's *Lasius* ants.

The sheriff looked at the hunting party where it was grouped in well-dressed aloofness from the small knot of employes of the Pines. Bifocaling the entire scene, with eyes glinting and a smile of disdain, was Clem Jayson, of the South Cape *News*.

WHEN everything was readied, Sheriff Zeller walked out over the boards with one of his packages, snapped the string, stooped low, opened the lid of his box, and a swarming, writhing, milling mass of black ants made an ebon spot of movement in the white ashes. As if by magic, the mass melted into the ashes, and then a murmur arose when two lines of slightly moving ashes rippled the surface of the area—marching, marching, marching.

One line was rippling toward Cabin Eight. The other was making slow but steady progress directly toward Cabin Three! Nash Crichton's cabin. Nash Crichton, whose jacket button had been found in the dead man's room, whose ex-wife had married the slain banker, who had had a serious quarrel with the slain man the night he died!

Zeller turned to receive the second package, and these he loosed some ten feet out from the first mass of ants.

Two more lines of white rippled the ashes. This time directly for the group of hunters, and for Cabin One! One of the hunting party laughed.

"Just as I predicted! They're wandering aimlessly."

It was Rappleyea, the lawyer.

The State Troopers detached themselves from the watchers and joined Zeller when he walked slowly over to stand with the group of hunters. Slowly the ants came on and on. One or two of the visitors started to move.

"No use moving, Mr. Rappleyea," Zeller said mildly. "I guess you got some of that honey on your shoes when you planted it under Crichton's cabin—Number Three—last night. That was smart, that plant. But you should have changed your shoes, and worn a different suit. Those ants can smell honey far as a bee can. They're really the same family, you see—*Hymenoptera*, the authorities call 'em. Bees and ants both. That smell of honey turned one line out of the footprints!"

"What are you talking about?" Rapple-

yea snorted. "I guess you are really the old fool they say you are! You think I believe this hocus-pocus with ants?"

"You didn't plant that honey under Cabin Three to draw the ants?" Zeller asked quietly. "Just in case I was right? Just in case the ants do follow faint depressions—as they do! You deny that? You never even had any honey to turn the ants away from Cabin One?"

Rapplyea blinked, then stamped at the swarm of white that was at his feet, on his shoes, all about him.

"No! Anyone says I did is a liar!"

"You went to the movies last night, with the others. In Oracook. Right? During the picture, you left your seat to go to the washroom. Instead, you went out and across the street to that small general store, looked around carefully, then ordered cigarettes, and writing paper, and bought a cheap fountain pen. While the storekeeper was busy getting them, you shoplifted two jars of honey from a counter."

"A fable, a lie!" Rappleyea shouted.

Zeller shook his head.

"Old Mose, here, saw you. Old Mose knows about the ants. As perhaps you do yourself. You're a pretty well-read man, Mr. Rappleyea. Old Mose knows, and he picked you for the murderer when he saw those ants tracking to your cabin, yesterday. Old Mose learned that from his African forebears. Another thing he does, too, that his old folks did—he never lets a killer out of his sight!

"Old Mose has had his eye on you from the first, because one way he can be sure you won't kill him is never to lose sight of you. He didn't! You perhaps didn't notice him among all the other Negroes we have in this section. But he saw you. Waited outside the movie, saw you in the store. Everything. The storekeeper has checked his stock, and backs up old Mose on this."

The sheriff turned.

"Anything you care to say, Crichton?"

THE red-faced hunter cleared his throat.

"I'll—talk," he whispered hoarsely. "I was afraid of Rappleyea and Studley both. When I came along to get into the car with them, they were arguing heatedly. I had come from behind, and they didn't see me, so I waited a bit, not wanting to interrupt. I realized then, from the talk, that Rappleyea was Studley's lawyer, and that they were wrangling over some shady deal both had worked on. Involving an effort to bilk Mr. Gorsline and Mr. Marchand.

"Rappleyea threatened to spoil the deal, and Studley laughed and reminded him he was Gorsline's lawyer and Marchand's lawyer—as well as his own—and he could be disbarred from practise for representing himself as the Gorsline-Marchand lawyer, while he had secretly been Studley's lawyer all these years."

Gorsline whistled.

"No wonder Rappleyea advised me not to sue Studley!" Dr. Kinnerley said. Wyants laughed harshly.

"Rappleyea cautioned me that Studley was legally right, that it could be I had misunderstood that application of my money!"

"Go ahead," Zeller said to Crichton. "What happened then?"

"I got into the car," the man said, "and from the way they looked at one another, and then at me, I got to figuring that if they were really mixed up in something bad, it might be a good idea for me to play dumb. Then I thought about the hunting, that if either or both were suspicious that I'd heard something, I might be accidentally shot. Finally, I didn't even want to ride with them, but I foolishly blurted I wanted to ride with Gorsline, and then they both looked pretty nasty about it. I purposely made a scene so Studley would know he might be suspected, if anything happened to me."

Zeller nodded. "And Rappleyea, fearful of being disbarred or exposed, saw a chance to kill Studley and frame you. Your story wouldn't have gained much credence, then, but with the evidence we have, I think Rappleyea is going to need all his legal talents to get off with even a life sentence. Hold him, boys!"

But Rappleyea wasn't running. He had staggered a few steps, then fallen in a faint, the lines of his face a broken mask of despair.

Zeller looked at Clem Jayson.

"Like you always are saying, Clem, we do need more lawmen in the county," he said, mildly. "It was sure a case of too many cops for Rappleyea, when those ants tracked him down!"

But Jayson was hurrying away. The *News* was almost ready to go to press, and there was a lot Jayson had to say. About smart country cops tracking down city-slick killers.

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Concluded from page 10)

good graces of Sheriff Shorny. The lawman gives Grant a very mysterious and yet a very useful bit of information. Who puts flowers on Vivian Hall's grave—and always on a Tuesday, the night she was killed? Well—who did? You don't think we're going to tell you—do you. Look forward to FLOWERS, MY PRETTY ONE!

A Willie Klump story next issue, too! They'll all be back—Satchelfoot Kelly, Gertie Mudgett, the Hawkeye Detective Agency and all the rest of it. Also, there will be the usual quota of other hot-off-the-griddle short stories. Our next issue is sure to please you!

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

YOUR letters have been coming along splendidly—and we are very happy to quote from some of them in this department from time to time. Every letter helps us improve this magazine.

We don't usually print letters sent, as this is, anonymously. However, the gentleman's point is well taken, so here goes:

May I suggest that the artist who illustrated "Death Has A Poker Face" in POPULAR DETECTIVE Magazine read the stories more carefully. The wording under the illustration on page 13, does not follow the story. See paragraph 11 of the first column on page 24.—A READER.

On the other hand, a lady over on the Jersey Shore, thinks the story is a knockout.

I like your POPULAR DETECTIVE Magazine very much. "Death Has a Poker Face," was a fine story and I thought Bill Dacey was a swell hero. He sure can stir up plenty of action.

As far as heroes go though, it has been a long time since anyone has come up with as good a detective as "Moody" Hackett in THE DEAD DON'T WRITE.

You see he had a good reason to become a detective on account of his father, yet he kept his promise to stay off the cops. What happened about Gee-Gee Griscom, the famous beauty, was also most unexpected. Hope author Roger Fuller is going to have another Moody Hackett yarn for us very soon. —MRS. SADIE NEWMANN, ASBURY PARK, N. J.

There you are folks! Thank you, Mrs. Newmann. You now know your wish concerning Moody Hackett will be gratified. Another missive praises still another of our popular authors:

Everybody can say what they like about this, that and the other of your authors, but I will take that salty creation of Colonel Jack Kofoed, known to us as the inimitable "Baldy" Simmons.

To me he is so up-to-date and yet so full of sagacity and good humor. Glad to see him grace the pages of POPULAR DETECTIVE, as well as some of your companion magazines.—WALTER K. SPROULL, JOHNSTOWN, N. Y.

Thank you, Walter. We kind of fall for good old Baldy ourselves. And so it goes, friends. Your letters are always interesting to us, so keep on sending them along! A postcard will do as well as a sealed letter. Kindly address all communications to The Editor, POPULAR DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

See you next issue—and happy reading to you all! —THE EDITOR.

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Monty Aborn lay there crumpled up, his neck broken

THE WALL OF LIGHT

By ANTHONY TOMPKINS

Ace Detective Jerry McKay Brilliantly Solves a Weird Crime, Unearths a Clever Killer—and Springs a Strange Surprise!

I FLASHED my shield at the girl in the outer office and barged through the door marked private, but it didn't say "strictly." I showed the badge to the man behind the desk, too, as I sat down.

"Jerry McKay," I said. "Detective First Class. I'm here to make a report to you, Mr. Phillips."

Phillips, who owned this factory that sprawled over a large section of the great city's suburbs, leaned back in his big chair and studied me for half a minute.

"A report about what?" he asked.

"The old factory you people abandoned a couple of years ago," I said. "There was a complaint at the precinct about some two hundred windows being smashed in it. Well —it was the work of kids. No sabotage, nothing but sheer deviltry. I busted windows like 'em myself when I was a boy."

Phillips nodded "So did I and there was some target in that old plant. Well, what happens next?"

I pulled out a notebook. "It says here you claim three hundred dollars worth of damage was done. Okay. I know the kids and I've talked to their parents. The bill will be paid, you'll get all new windows and if you take my advice, don't have the kids dragged into juvenile court."

"No," Phillips said. "No, of course not. I remember my own youth too well. I used to swipe railroad signal bombs and plant 'em on the tracks. It really was fun in my innocence of not knowing what I did. But I find myself much more interested in you, officer. Your face is familiar. I'd almost swear—yes, you did say your name was Jerry McKay."

"Always has been," I told him. I knew what was coming. It was as inevitable as daylight tomorrow morning.

"But," Phillips frowned, "I don't understand. You're one of the most famous detectives on the force. Why, you solved many, many cases that stumped other detectives. And yet—you're assigned to investigating a routine complaint about broken windows. It doesn't make sense. There must be something wrong."

I nodded wearily. "Yeah—his name is Gordon. But don't figure it all out that way, Mr. Phillips. It takes a smart cop to dig up kids who break windows. You don't have clues or stoolies or much help. People you talk to grin and shrug when you ask questions. It took me longer to locate these kids than it did that gang of jewelry store thieves a few years ago."

"Um—yes," Phillips reached for a mahogany humidor. "I remember the case. You were positively brilliant in handling it. You see, I study crime. It's a hobby of mine. I want to make a bargain with you, McKay. Tell me why you were transferred to this forsaken spot and I'll promise not to prosecute the kids."

I laughed at him. I liked the man. He was my style.

"You wouldn't hail 'em in court if I got muter than a clam with lockjaw," I said.

"I'll turn part of the old factory into a playground," Phillips tempted me and I accepted one of his cigars, leaned back and told him. Until some bachelor lady telephoned that a man was peeking through her window, or there was a little traffic accident some place or more busted windows, there wouldn't be much for me to do. The cigar was good—Havana—and I felt mellow.

I used to get cigars like that in the good old days, from Maxie Feigen who ran a high class tobacco shop almost across the street from Headquarters. That was six months ago. Just six months that seemed more like six centuries.

I closed my eyes and let the sweet, heady smoke curl around my nostrils while my mind went back. I talked to Mr. Phillips, but it was more like thinking out loud.

SURE—I remembered the days when I was in line for a sergeancy which would lead to a lieutenant's badge and from there on straight up. The days when I was Inspector Gordon's pet and got only the just-

[*Turn page*]

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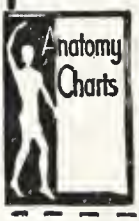

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right cases to handle. The ones which involved the most and best publicity. Like the snatch of a pretty, photogenic society girl whom I located and rescued even before the F.B.I. started to work on it. Or the recovery of a rajah's ruby then owned by an important woman noted for getting into headlines. She shared them with me that time. I was going places fast.

That was the reason why Inspector Gordon sent for me. A hurry call that made my long legs fly down the corridor. I recognized the symptoms in Gordon's voice when he'd phoned.

Gordon was long and lanky. He looked more like a farmer than a smart detective. In fact, some went so far as to say he looked stupid. Mind you, I say looked. He was anything but dumb.

Gordon untangled his long legs from around a battered old chair which was out of place behind that big, shiny desk.

"McKay," he said, "I received a phone call from Montgomery Aborn a minute ago. Yes, the Monty Aborn who gives away all that money to charity. He was excited, wouldn't say much, but wanted my very best man to get over there as fast as possible. There's a cruiser waiting outside. Snap into it."

I gave him a snappy salute.

"Thanks, sir. I'm on my way," I said.

Monty Aborn lived in one of those places on the Drive. A private dwelling that wasn't sandwiched in between the skyscrapers, because Monty owned plenty of land around his house and held onto it. There was a high fence, a massive gate and an estate that belonged in the country and not in the middle of a great city.

The gate was open and I drove through it, stopped the car in front of the porch and got out. I looked at the building. It was three stories high. Every window except those in what I later found out was the living room, was pitch dark. The living room windows shone with a blaze of light that almost blinded me.

I rang the bell, waited about ten seconds and then kicked the door. When that drew no response, I sensed there was something terribly wrong. I used my heel again, to smash a low window off the porch. I got the sash raised and crawled through. The only thing that welcomed me was silence. There was too much of it. I drew my service pistol, crossed the dining room into which I'd broken my way, hiked over the wide reception hall and headed for the closed door beneath which shone that concentrated light.

All I could think of was the questioning room at Headquarters with those big lamps shining on a prisoner and making him sweat. That was how much there was of it.

Finger steady on the trigger, I turned the doorknob quietly and flung the door wide

open. I closed my eyes involuntarily because the light hurt them. I had to raise one arm as a shield against all that luminosity and then I made out a few things.

The living room was one of those movie sets where actors cup hands to their lips and yell trains—as if the place was Grand Central Terminal.

I didn't do any yelling. I just stood there, gaping at the circle of lamps. It seemed that every single lamp in the house had been brought to this room and arranged in that circle. The shades were all removed, leaving the bulbs bare and giving off all their brightness.

The effect was weird and startling. No pair of eyes could hope to see beyond that ring of light. I went closer and finally pulled a couple of lamps to one side. Then I saw it.

Monty Aborn had given his last dime to charity—unless his will donated the fortune he was reputed to have. He lay there crumpled up in the same ungainly position a drunk assumes when he falls in a gutter some place in the Bowery. With one specific difference. Monty Aborn lay on his stomach, but his face looked up at the ceiling. His neck was neatly broken.

I put the gun away then and mechanically checked his pulse, knowing all the time there couldn't possibly be any. The flesh was warm. He hadn't been dead very long, although the heat of those lamps wasn't cooling the corpse any. Nor me. I sweated as if a Florida sun as its hottest blazed at me.

Next I searched the house without finding anyone. I didn't look for clues. Not then. That could come later. The front door was closed and the spring latch locked it. Anybody could have gone out and left it that way. The other doors were firmly bolted so the killer evidently had nerve enough to walk out the front.

I did find that there wasn't a lamp left in any of the eighteen rooms. Not even tiny night-table lamps with weak bulbs. They were all in the living room, ringing the corpse of a man who, of all people in this great city, didn't deserve a death like that.

I phoned Inspector Gordon next and then I really started to work. There wasn't a clue. Nothing at all. I couldn't tell about fingerprints, of course, until the boys arrived with their blowers, powders and lenses, but right then I'd have given odds they'd find nothing. We were up against a clever killer.

Inspector Gordon arrived in style, flanked by more detectives, lab technicians, apparatus and reporters in droves. These poor fellows—the reporters—had their tongues hanging out for some juicy case that would rob space off the foreign correspondents. Right here they got the proper material for that.

[*Turn page*]

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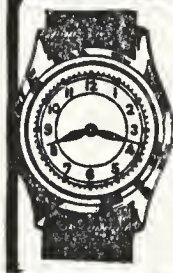

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MONTY ABORN was news. Murder was news and the two combined spelled sensationalism. I'd be news, too, if I broke the case and I was frantically determined to do it. This was one of the kind I liked. Nothing to go on. Not one blasted item. The victim was one of the best liked persons in the country. He didn't have an enemy.

There were no fingerprints, no footprints, no weapon to be traced, no hidden rooms or passages. Just a plain, solid murder case without trimmings. The hardest kind to crack. I accepted the challenge. Gordon, sensing the job might be unsolvable, discreetly withdrew and left the whole thing to me.

The medical examiner arrived in due course, accompanied by a pompous, goateed individual who was introduced to me as Doctor Newton Dale. I assumed it was an M.D. that gave him the title. Dentists and veterinarians don't usually wear goatees.

The M.E. was a fussy little man, but very capable. He went down on his knees beside the corpse and he had plenty of light for his examination. Plenty! Meanwhile, this Doctor Dale was walking around the circle of lamps, tugging at his beard. He seemed to know something and I decided to stick close.

The M.E. was a frustrated little fellow. Reporters never took pictures of him and he liked publicity. So he made his pronouncements as important sounding as possible.

"Death is from a broken neck. Violence, of course. Certainly murder. I can't say just where he was killed, but the body seems to have been carried to this spot and—why the devil did you bring all those lamps here? Want to blind me?"

"The lamps were as you see them now," I told him. "Go on, doc."

"Well, I'm blinded anyhow. You could turn some of them off. As I was saying, the body was arranged in this position. Gruesome enough to be the work of a maniac—and the violence shown by the nature of the death points toward a maniacal killer also. Mind you, that's just an opinion."

"But a worthy opinion and a clever one." Doctor Dale wangled his way through the ring of lights and went to the M.E.'s side. "Doctor, I'm inclined to believe, from my experience, that a mad killer committed this crime. I became certain of it when Detective McKay stated he found the lights arranged in this manner."

The M.E. puffed a little, but he had hardly any chest at all to stick out. "Doctor Dale," he announced, "is one of the greatest psychiatrists in the city. If he agrees with me that a crazy person committed this crime, you can look for a maniac."

"Yeah," I said, "let's get back to facts. Doc—how long has he been dead? The usual estimate."

"Hard to tell with all this heat from the lamps." The M.E. clucked his tongue. "I'd say an hour, maybe a bit less."

I frowned at that one. "But Inspector Gordon got a call from Aborn just thirty-eight minutes ago. He must have been alive then—or an imposter called."

"I don't pretend to understand that," Doctor Dale said. "There is probably a logical explanation."

"Yeah," I agreed, "anything could have happened. I never met a killer who arranged a circle of lights and put the body of his victim in the middle of them. Say, Doctor Dale, if the killer was crazy, maybe these lights mean something."

Doctor Dale nodded and kept tugging at that beard.

"Undoubtedly," he agreed. "Undoubtedly, Mr. McKay. If we can determine just why the murderer arranged those lights we can, possibly, narrow down the field to a certain class of maniac. Right now I'm totally unprepared to offer any suggestions as to that, but if you take my advice there is a certain course to follow."

"Yes." I drew him out.

"Determine whether or not Mr. Aborn had any connection with persons of maniacal tendencies. Or if he ever—let's say unknowingly—did a wrong to a man who might have gone mad. Or has a history of mental trouble. Check that angle and you may get something."

Just like that! Check everybody Aborn ever knew and see who'd gone balmy. Yet I sensed right there that this particular method would probably produce the fastest results, tedious as the job might become. I went to work right away, after phoning in a report to Inspector Gordon.

First, I visited a newspaper morgue and got the file on Aborn. It was thick and required two hours to read. I spent one hour at it and discarded the rest of the clips when I came across one about a fire that had destroyed some of his property.

It had happened two years before. A whole row of tenements had burned down. Four people died in the flames. Flames meant light. Walls of flames. Walls of light. Things clicked in my mind. I had to see Doctor Dale and I drove straight to his house.

It was one of those penthouse affairs atop a big apartment building. A place that bordered on the gaudy side although I saw some portraits painted by masters on the walls and I knew the furniture was never made in any North Carolina shop where wormholes were manufactured with the furniture. This was the real stuff, each piece worth a small fortune.

The rug curled up around my ankles and there was a sideboard laden with decanters that made my mouth water. Doctor Dale

[*Turn page*]

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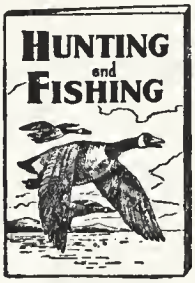

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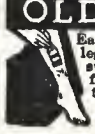

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dismissed his servant and greeted me warmly.

"I don't know why you came, Mr. McKay, but I'm glad you did. The murder interests me intensely. What have you discovered?"

I settled myself in one of those expensive chairs and wished I were home in the ancient Morris chair that should have been an antique but wasn't—yet. It happened to be a lot more comfortable.

"Doc," I said, "some of Aborn's tenements burned down a couple of years ago. Four people were lost in the fire. Now what I'm getting at is this. Could somebody trapped in that fire have gone berserk from the agony of it? You know—faced by a wall of flame with no escape possible."

DOC DALE pulled that goatee again.

"Wall of flame," he said enthusiastically. "Wall of light. It's the same thing. McKay, you're a genius. Without the slightest education in psychiatry you stumbled upon the one explanation. The murderer killed Aborn out of revenge for that fire. He arranged the lights so they'd form a wall to resemble a wall of flame. Don't you see what I'm getting at?"

I nodded.

"Yes, I do. But if the man is crazy, why didn't he set the house on fire? Why did he kill Aborn first and then arrange the lights, as he must have done?"

"Because that is the way maniacs think," Dale said quickly. "He didn't start a fire because he still fears flame. The wall of light was sufficient, don't you see? To his disordered mind it was a wall of fire through which Aborn could not escape."

"Okay," I said. "It's worth following through. I'm going to check everybody who lived in those tenements when the fire happened. Especially those who were hurt or who lost loved ones in the flames. But Doc, maybe the fellow never showed any homicidal tendencies before. Maybe he isn't even known to be crazy."

Dale rubbed his hands. That was a relief from tugging at his beard anyhow.

"And now," he said, "you come to my special province. Assemble the people you suspect. Let me talk to them; observe them. I'll know which of those suspects can be eliminated and which must be carefully watched. Remember, a maniac is sometimes highly egotistical. Getting away with this murder may lead him to others."

I went to work on one of the toughest propositions of my career. I made Inspector Gordon put me in charge of a staff and I sent them out. I did plenty of work myself. It took a full week before we had what we all figured were the most likely people to suspect.

Gordon, meanwhile, had gone off on a tangent of his own which produced negative results, but proved Aborn's murder must

have been the deed of a maniac with only a haphazard motive so far as murder motives go.

I brought Doctor Dale to Headquarters where he could talk to these people. There were twenty-seven of them. He talked to them, one by one, in private. They had to be treated with kid gloves, you see. Nobody was pinched. Dale really worked. When he was finished, there were three men left. He told me about them.

"Take the case of Arthur Carrol, for instance," he said. "He was severely burned and had to have a lot of painful and expensive plastic surgery done. He was subject to great shock. While he has shown no mental aberrations, he is to be watched. Our killer may not even know he has murdered a man."

I looked into the next room and singled out this Arthur Carrol. He was a seedy-looking gent, about fifty and his face was shiny from the mass of tiny scars he'd carry to his grave. He was a nervous fellow, too, pulling his necktie like Doc Dale tugged at his beard.

The next on the program was Horatio Apley, a skinny little fellow with a hangdog expression who looked as if he couldn't hurt a flea. I'd seen those inoffensive little lads flare up and give a pretty good account of themselves so I didn't discount Apley.

"He lost his mother and father in the fire," Dale explained. "Nearly cost him his life trying to rescue them. Prior to the fire, he had a modest job as a bookkeeper and lost it because his nerves were affected."

"And the third one?" I moved my head in the direction of the bruiser who was one of the trio. There was a lad who could break necks like you and I break spaghetti.

"His name is Kowal," Dale said. "Like Apley, he lost a loved one in the fire. His only child. His wife died later from combined sorrow and injuries she received. Kowal admits acting like a maniac after the fire happened."

"And what do I do now? Start a fire and see which one of 'em goes berserk?" I queried.

Dale smiled. At least I think he smiled. That darned beard hid a lot of things. "That will be hardly necessary. None of them admits having any brain trouble, but you might check and see if any one of them ever entered a sanitarium."

I checked. Horatio Apley had been a sanitarium patient for months, a direct result of the fire. Nothing violent, mind you. Just a matter of hallucinations and things like that. I reported this to Doc Dale and he told me Apley must be watched and everything he did turned in as a written report.

That was a job for one of my assistants, so I assigned him to it, with plenty of relief men on deck. Gordon was satisfied that Doc

[*Turn page*]

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Dale had hit the right track. He gave the usual promises of an arrest to be made soon. That didn't stop the reporters. They were after me so much I had to duck.

I ducked into Monty Aborn's mansion to combine a little privacy with some business. I reasoned that a maniac would probably be more apt to leave clues than a sane person, so if I could find a little something to tie this Horatio Apley to the scene, I'd have him cold.

The house was lonesome and cold. I telephoned Doc Dale and told him where I was if he needed me for anything.

"Sure, I'm looking around," I said. "Detectives still hunt clues even in this day and age. The killer was in every room in this house. He had to visit them all to get the lamps. I'll probably find nothing, but it's worth the chance anyway."

Dale agreed with me and made me promise to keep him posted. Nothing had been touched in the house, despite the days which had elapsed since the murder. Monty Aborn's desk intrigued me. After I examined the other rooms without an iota of success, I concentrated on his papers. There were reams of them. Monty, it seemed, had enjoyed being his own bookkeeper.

It made me sore about the whole thing, too, for Monty's interest in life rested in trying to make those who needed help, happier people. There were playgrounds he'd provided, rest homes, food baskets at holiday times, hospital wings. A man like that deserved to die in bed with expert medical care to ease any pain. Not to face a lunatic and have his neck broken.

USED checkbooks for the last two years were orderly arranged. I ran through them out of curiosity and discovered that one of the books was missing. It covered a period of four months of the previous year. Everything else was so methodically kept that it made me wonder. I went to work in earnest and pretty soon I found other things missing. Record books and a file of receipts—all pertaining to that period covered by the missing checkbook.

The next morning I visited Monty's bank, but they couldn't help me except to show master sheets covering deposits and withdrawals. A lot of money had passed through that account.

I went to Monty's lawyers and they knew nothing. Monty never discussed his charitable transactions with them. It looked to me as though I was wasting a lot of time on nothing. The angle of a mad killer was the strongest. Everyone believed in it, especially Inspector Gordon.

That night I went home to the one-room bachelor quarters I maintained in a moderately priced hotel. I was dead tired and a little disgusted because none of the suspects

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NAME.....OCCUPATION.....
ADDRESS.....AGE.....
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had betrayed anything which would single one of them out as the probable killer. The newspapers were raising a howl. Gordon was tramping the floor and I knew the Commissioner wasn't happy about the thing at all.

I fell asleep promptly and had dreams. They were about fires. Deadly flames that hemmed me in like a wall. I awoke with a start, sighed and wished those crazy dreams would go away. But when a tongue of fire started crawling along my bedcovers, I suddenly decided it wasn't all a dream. The room was on fire.

Not just the usual blaze caused by a cigarette, but burning furiously in a dozen different places. Especially near the door. I couldn't even see it for crimson flame.

I wrapped a blanket around me, one that was only scorched. I covered my head, except for the eyes, and tried to reach the door. I did manage, by not breathing at all and by setting my teeth against the heat. I twisted the knob and the spring night-lock. The door wouldn't open.

I had to retreat because if I hadn't, those flames would have been sucked down into my lungs. Right then I felt like a deep sea diver whose air line had been cut off. I backed up to the window. It was closed. I raised it and looked out across the tops of nearby buildings. I looked down through eighteen stories of uncomfortable space.

The phone was, luckily, in a corner where

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the fire hadn't yet crept. I sensed the fact that the blaze was confined to my room only and no one else realized the danger as yet.

I grabbed the phone and cursed the sleepy operator who took her time in answering. I reported the fire and told her to send apparatus equipped with a safety net. Jumping eighteen stories wasn't exactly what I called fun, but neither were those flames.

I was penned against the window, snatching what fresh air I could get, when the fire lads rolled up. If they'd have been five minutes later, I'd have had no story to tell. They didn't rig the net. Instead, they sent men up to smash in the door. Then, chemicals were turned loose and a stream of water played on me while I rushed across the room and through the door.

Later, I put on some clothes that smelled to high heaven of smoke. A fire captain in charge, called me to one side.

"It was incendiary," he said. "Some odorless chemical in which a lot of paraffin had been dissolved. It was sprayed all over the room. The door was jammed from outside. Somebody doesn't like you, McKay."

"Yeah," I nodded. "And whoever it is, I don't like him either."

I went down to the desk. There I discovered that a man had asked for me, but when reminded of the late hour, he'd gone away. The desk clerk had a good description of him. It fitted this Horatio Apley perfectly.

I contacted the detective who was supposed to be watching Apley and found that he'd been on duty in front of Apley's apartment, but that Apley could have left via a rear door.

"My fault," I told the detective. "It was a two-man job and I only assigned you. Keep your eyes open. I'll be down later."

I telephoned Doctor Dale and told him what happened. Dale was highly alarmed. "Watch yourself, McKay," he warned. "A maniac won't be deterred by one failure. The fact that fire was used in an effort to kill you, indicates one of those men. Probably Apley, as you suspect."

"Look, Doc," I said, "I'm tired of fooling around. I think I can prove Apley came to my hotel, evaded the man I assigned to watch him and could have started that fire. If I drag him in tomorrow, can you tell from a complete examination if he's crazy?"

"I think so," Dale answered. "In fact, I'm sure of it Still, even if I do pronounce him insane, can you be certain he is the man you want? There may be two mentally afflicted survivors of that tenement fire."

"I'm going to work on it now," I said. said. "Stick around tomorrow so I can reach you."

I did work too. Part of the time at City Hall, where building and land records are kept. Later, I went to Horatio Apley's apartment. Apley was certainly not right mentally.

I put him down as weak-minded. He maintained that he'd never left his place. I brought him to the hotel and the clerk identified him in a flash, but still Apley refused to admit he'd been at my hotel.

I received a telephone call from a City Engineer then. "McKay," he said, "I've gone through the records. Montgomery Aborn took steps to buy property on Blane Street and filed plans to erect a small hospital there. He got priorities okay, but nothing ever happened. Like everyone else, he probably couldn't get material or labor."

FROWNING a bit, I hung up. Then I turned to Apley. "Look here, maybe there has been a mistake. Someone who looked like you came here. Maybe you have a brother."

He nodded. "I've got two brothers. One of them was in the fire too."

I had Apley locked up and I telephoned Doctor Dale. "Apley refused to admit he was in the neighborhood of my hotel last night, but he does state he has a brother. Some brothers look alike so I'm going to search for this other one. We must have passed him up somehow."

"Bring him to me," Dale said. "And get all the information about him you can."

Finding Apley's brother wasn't too hard. I took him to Headquarters and called Doc Dale again to make certain he'd be at his office. I agreed to bring the brother over.

"What does he look like?" Dale asked. "Similar to Horatio Apley?"

I glanced at the man. "Well, no. He's tall and rangy, with dark brown hair and a more or less stupid expression. You can see for yourself shortly. I'll be right over."

I went to Inspector Gordon's office then and made a full report. I added, "It happens I need a favor, sir. I can't do much explaining, but I'll require some help."

Gordon, in the rosy comfort of seeing the case cracked open, agreed to anything. Half an hour later I was in Doc Dale's office. Outside in the waiting room were a couple of reporters who insisted on trailing us.

"This," I indicated my companion, "is the man I talked to you about over the phone, Doc. He admits having been confined to an institution for mental cases and he's scared stiff of fires."

Dale yanked at that goatee again, picked up some kind of a weird looking light and sat his patient on a high chair. He turned on the light and studied something about eye reflexes. Then he tapped the lad's knees, asked a lot of questions that were silly to me.

All of a sudden he thrust a pocket cigarette lighter into the man's face and snapped it. The flame leaped up and the patient gave a yelp and drew back. I'd have done the same.

There was a lot more of this stuff. While

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it was going on, I noticed the door to the waiting room was open a crack. Those reporters weren't missing a thing. Finally, Doc Dale laid down his latest instrument.

"McKay," he said, "you have found the right man I shall sign the necessary papers to commit him to a psychopathic ward. I shall accept him as my patient and treat him. He isn't to blame for what happened. Perhaps I can make a well man of him soon."

"So he's crazy," I asked. "Sure of it, Doc? We don't want to make any mistakes on this. Arresting him will clear up Aborn's murder."

Dale shrugged.

"I could go into detail with a lot of technical phrases you wouldn't understand," the doctor continued. "The fact remains that this man is not in his right mind. He is potentially dangerous, yet with proper treatment he may respond.

"If he does, and the condition clears up, he will remember killing Aborn and trying to kill you. Right now those things mean nothing to him. He has been afflicted before, as you told me. I'd say he is our man. I—what are you fussing with my appointment book for?"

I just glanced at Dale. "I was just looking at the page covering the day when Aborn was murdered. You cancelled a lot of appointments for that night, Doc."

"And is it any of your business if I did?" he demanded. "Let's get back to cases."

"Sure," I said. "Let's take the one about Aborn being convinced the East Side needed a new charity hospital for emergency treatment of mental cases. It was going to be right on the corner of Blane and Ward streets. Aborn bought the property, but nothing was ever built there. And every record is missing from Aborn's files.

"Yet, is it just coincidence that Aborn gave somebody a check for thirty-two thousand dollars which was to be used in building and equipping this hospital? He drew that check on the nineteenth of the month and on the twentieth a check for exactly that amount was deposited to your account. The cancelled check can't be found, but of course you can explain where you got all that dough."

Dale almost pulled the goatee out then. "What are you driving at, McKay? You almost sound as if you suspect I had something to do with the death of Aborn."

"You broke his neck, Doc," I said unpleasantly. "Because you were supposed to use that money to build a new hospital and instead you used it to pay a lot of old debts. You had a good income, but you lived way beyond it. Your apartment shows that. You tried to destroy everything connected with the transaction and you succeeded except for bank records you couldn't get at.

"The night of the murder, you cancelled a lot of appointments You met the M.E. and

accompanied him to the scene of the crime because you wanted to put over the idea that Aborn had been killed by a maniac.

"You knew about the tenement fire, knew some of the victims had gone temporarily mad and that the police were bound to dig up at least a couple who could be homicidal killers. You arranged the lights, and if I hadn't mentioned the theory about a wall of flame, you'd have advanced it."

Dale looked sick about then, but he still maintained his poise.

"Look here, McKay, this is all rot. You brought me a man who had a motive—an insane one, I'll grant—for killing Aborn. I've examined him and he is mad. He spent time in an asylum before."

"Stop it, Doc," I said. "The suspect you examined is Inspector Gordon, my boss."

Doc tried to get clear then, but with the help of the reporters outside, we had him.

MR. PHILLIPS, who owned the factory where the windows had been broken, sighed deeply and handed me another cigar.

"I think I understand why you were sent to the sticks, McKay. Gordon didn't like being your guinea pig."

I laughed a little.

"Like it? Why those reporters made the best story of the year out of it. Gordon being pronounced insane! No, he never got over that. He tried to bust me, but couldn't because I'd broken the case. So he sent me here."

"But why," Phillips asked, "were you so foolish as to bring Gordon? Why not some other detective?"

I stuffed the fresh cigar into my pocket.

"Well, Mr. Phillips, when Doc Dale asked me to describe this brother of Horatio Apley's, I just gave a description at random and unconsciously it was that of Gordon. When I realized it, there was nothing to do but get Gordon over to the Doc's office. He didn't know the full facts.

"Horatio Apley, incidently, confessed that he had visited my hotel, but was afraid to admit this after the fire happened. It seems he got a phone call from someone claiming my identity and asking me to come over, but if I wasn't in the lobby to forget the whole thing. Horatio followed orders and then got scared. Dale, of course, arranged that and tried to murder me too. He knew I might find something at Aborn's house."

I opened the office door.

"Thanks for the cigars, Mr. Phillips. Yeah—Gordon certainly was sore about it. I never saw a man so angry. You'd think he'd have been a good sport about it."

I walked out and forced my mind back to my job. Somebody had swiped some chickens off a small farm within the limits of the precinct. I had to go see if there was any trail of feathers.

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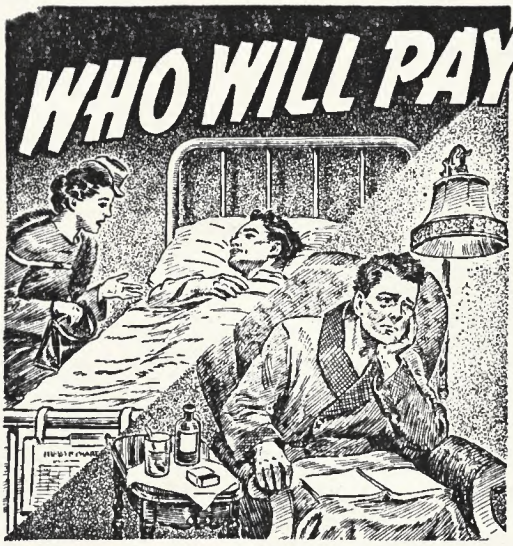

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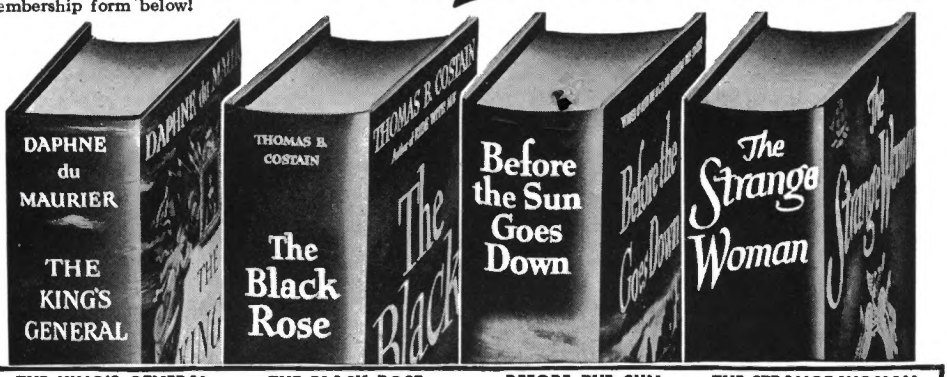

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